

Columbus Ophthalmology Associates
FLASHES AND FLOATERS

What are floaters?

Many patients experience a sudden onset of small black floating particles in their line of sight. Floaters can come in many different shapes such as small dots, circles, or lines. They are often visible when looking at a plain background and when reading a book or newspaper. These floaters are actually small clumps or cells within the vitreous cavity (the clear jelly-like substance that fills the inside of the eye). Light entering the eye strikes these cells, casting a shadow onto the retina.

What causes floaters?

The vitreous gel can be disrupted by trauma or can start to thin out as we get older. Shrinkage of the gel then occurs and small clumps shift forward into the vitreous space.

What causes flashes?

The photoreceptor cells of the retina interpret the tugging on the retina by the vitreous gel as flashes of light.

What can be done to prevent the condition?

Most cases of floaters and flashes of light cannot be prevented. They are common and are a normal part of aging. This condition is not contagious and poses no risk to others.

Are flashes and floaters treatable?

In most cases, floaters and flashes do not cause any permanent damage. However, their symptoms can be similar to that of a retinal detachment which is an emergency condition that needs immediate attention. There is no way for a patient to distinguish between a new onset of floaters or a retinal detachment. Therefore, any new symptoms, such as hundreds of floaters, cobwebs, or veils, especially associated with loss of vision, or a dark curtain blocking a part of your peripheral vision will require an immediate retinal evaluation by the eye doctor.

In most cases, vitreous floaters are a benign process. The cells of vitreous debris will float to the bottom of the eye and start to thin out with time. Although they will never disappear completely, they will become less noticeable and less bothersome.

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