

WESTSIDE OPTOMETRY

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Flashes and Floaters – Routine Effects of Aging or Cause for Concern?

Floaters

The small “spots” or “threads” that many people see moving in their field of vision are called *floaters*. They are especially apparent when you are looking at a plain background, such as a blank wall or blue sky. You may see them as little dots, circles, lines or cobwebs.

Floaters are actually small clumps of gel or old cells that float in the *vitreous* (the clear, jellylike fluid that fills the inside cavity of the eye). The *retina*, or light-sensing inner layer of the eye, sees these moving spots as shadows.

The appearance of floaters may worry you, especially if they develop suddenly. Keep in mind that floaters are usually of little importance and simply represent the aging process. The vitreous gel shrinks with time, pulling away from the retina and causing floaters. This is especially common in nearsighted people or those who have had eye surgery.

Floaters can also signal that there is a hole or tear in the retina. For this reason, it is important for anyone who has recently developed floaters or noticed an increase of floaters to have a dilated eye examination. Dr. Griffith will examine the vitreous and retina, including where the vitreous attaches to the retina, (where rips are most likely to occur). In the majority of cases, there are no holes. If the retina is torn, it usually can be treated before a more serious problem develops.

Flashes

The vitreous gel can sometimes pull on the retina, causing flashing lights or lightning streaks where there really are none. This same sensation sometimes occurs if you have been hit in the eye and see “stars.” It can also happen, as you grow older, with flashes appearing off and on for weeks. There is a possibility that as the vitreous “tugs” on the retina, it may actually cause the retina to tear.

On rare occasions, flashes are accompanied by a large number of new floaters and even a blacking out of part of the field of vision. If this occurs, you should call the office immediately and schedule an appointment to determine if a retinal tear or retinal detachment has developed.

A subset of light flashes is a migraine type. Some people experience flashes of light that appear as jagged lines or “heat waves” in both eyes, often lasting seconds to minutes. These types of flashes are usually caused by a spasm of blood vessels in the brain. If a headache follows the flashes, it is called a migraine headache. However, jagged lines or “heat waves” can occur without a headache.

Prognosis for Spots and Floaters

Most spots and floaters are annoying but harmless and the vast majority of people with floaters do not develop a retinal detachment. Early detection and treatment of retinal holes and tears is important to prevent a retinal detachment. Whether you see clusters, specks, black dots or cobwebs, most floaters become less annoying over time. The floater(s) usually settles downward out of view and the brain learns to ignore it.

It is wise to have your eyes checked if you experience a sudden onset of many new floaters or flashes of light.