

## Flashes and Floaters

If you get the following symptoms, you should get urgent medical attention.

- A sudden increase in floaters, particularly if you also notice flashing lights.
- A new, large, floater.
- A change in floaters or flashing lights after you have had a direct blow to your eye.
- A shadow spreading across the vision of one of your eyes.

If you notice any of these symptoms, please see your optician who will advise you further.

### What are floaters?

Floaters appear as black spots or something that looks like a hair or small pieces of a cobweb. These can be semi-transparent or dark and appear to float in front of your vision. If you have had these for years, your eye and your brain learn to ignore them. While annoying, ordinary eye floaters and spots are very common and usually aren't cause for alarm. If you went to the Antarctic and looked at the white snow and white sky, you would see hundreds of floaters. These are common and a part of you. New floaters that are different are what raises alarm bells.

Sometimes the number of floaters increases as you get older. Occasionally an increase in floaters can be a sign of problems inside the eye. As they 'float' in

#### Making a referral:

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the jelly of your eye, you will find that if you move your eye to try to look at a floater, it will move away in the direction you move your eye. You might only see the floater if you are staring at a light-coloured surface or at the sky during the day. Some people find that floaters can be a nuisance but most people become used to them. They rarely cause problems with your vision.

For some people, floaters are clumpy; for others, they're stringy. They may be light or dark. What you see is actually the shadows cast by clumps of vitreous gel when light shines past them onto the retina.

The sudden appearance of these symptoms could mean that the vitreous is pulling away from your retina or that the retina itself is becoming dislodged from the inner back of the eye that contains blood, nutrients and oxygen vital to healthy function.

### **Why do floaters happen?**

Many people are born with floaters. Other floaters occur as you get older when the gel in the eye, the vitreous humour, naturally shrinks. As the gel shrinks and becomes watery, the gel collapses away from the retina and forms a large floater. If the vitreous gel collapses, it sometimes pulls on your retina. If this happens, you may see flashes of light.

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There are other causes of floaters. These include:

1. Inflammatory eye diseases causing inflammation in the vitreous gel and retina
2. Blood leakage as a result of a posterior vitreous detachment or diabetes
3. Trauma to the eye
4. Some eye operations, like YAG laser capsulotomy or cataract surgery.
5. Being shortsighted is a risk factor for floaters

### **What happens if you have floaters?**

Most of the time floaters are harmless. Sometimes they may be annoying, but treatment is not advised. A sudden increase in floaters – either one or more large ones or a shower of tiny ones – may be a sign of a more serious eye disease such, as a retinal detachment. This is when your retina pulls away from the back of your eye and it may lead to a sudden increase in floaters and possibly a blank spot or shadow in your vision which does not go away. This needs immediate medical attention.

### **Flashing Lights**

Flashing lights are usually associated with floaters. These are perceived as sparkles, lightning or fireworks and last only a few seconds at a time.

If you suffer migraines, you may get zig zag lines or a shimmering sensation in the vision lasting upto 15 minutes, which are different to flashing lights.

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The retina doesn't have pain fibres so responds to problems with the eye flashes of light, signifying something may not be quite right. Flashes happen when there is a pull on your retina. This might happen as the vitreous gel inside your eye becomes more liquid and collapses.

Flashes can also happen if you are hit in the eye. Flashes related to a collapse of the gel inside the eye are more likely to happen as you get older. A retinal tear or retinal detachment may lead to a sudden increase in floaters as well as flashes. You might notice a shadow at the edge of your vision as well. This needs immediate medical attention from an eye casualty department at the hospital. If there is no eye casualty department nearby, you can go to your usual hospital casualty department. However, it is best if you can go to a special eye casualty department.

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