

Floaters and Flashing Lights

Patient information leaflet

What are floaters?

Floaters are small shapes that drift across your vision — specks, threads, cobwebs or a ring. They are shadows cast on the retina by strands within the vitreous, the clear jelly that fills the eye. They move when you move your eye and are easiest to see against a plain bright background such as a wall or the sky.

Why they appear

With age the vitreous jelly shrinks and separates from the retina. This is called posterior vitreous detachment and it is a normal change, most often between the ages of 50 and 70, and earlier in short-sighted eyes. As the jelly pulls away, it may tug on the retina, which the brain interprets as a flash of light.

Why you were examined today

In most people this separation happens without harm. In a small number the jelly pulls hard enough to tear the retina, and an untreated tear can lead to a retinal detachment. A tear can be sealed with laser in a few minutes; a detachment requires surgery. This is why new floaters and flashes are examined promptly, with drops to widen the pupil so the whole retina can be seen.

What happens now

- If no tear was found, no treatment is needed. Floaters become less noticeable over weeks to months as the brain learns to ignore them.
- The jelly may continue to separate over the next few weeks, so new symptoms during this period should be reported.
- Your pupils were dilated today: near vision will be blurred and you will be sensitive to light for four to six hours. Do not drive until this has passed.

Return the same day if you notice any of the following

- A sudden shower of new floaters, or a marked increase in the number
- Flashing lights that become more frequent or persistent
- A dark curtain, shadow or veil moving across any part of your vision
- A sudden drop in vision

Living with floaters

Most people adapt well. Good lighting and moving the eye up and down can shift a floater out of the line of sight. Surgery to remove floaters exists but carries real risk, and is reserved for the rare cases where vision is genuinely and persistently impaired.

Reviewed by Dr. Aysun Yucel Gencoglu, MD, FEBO, FICO.

Notes for you from today's consultation