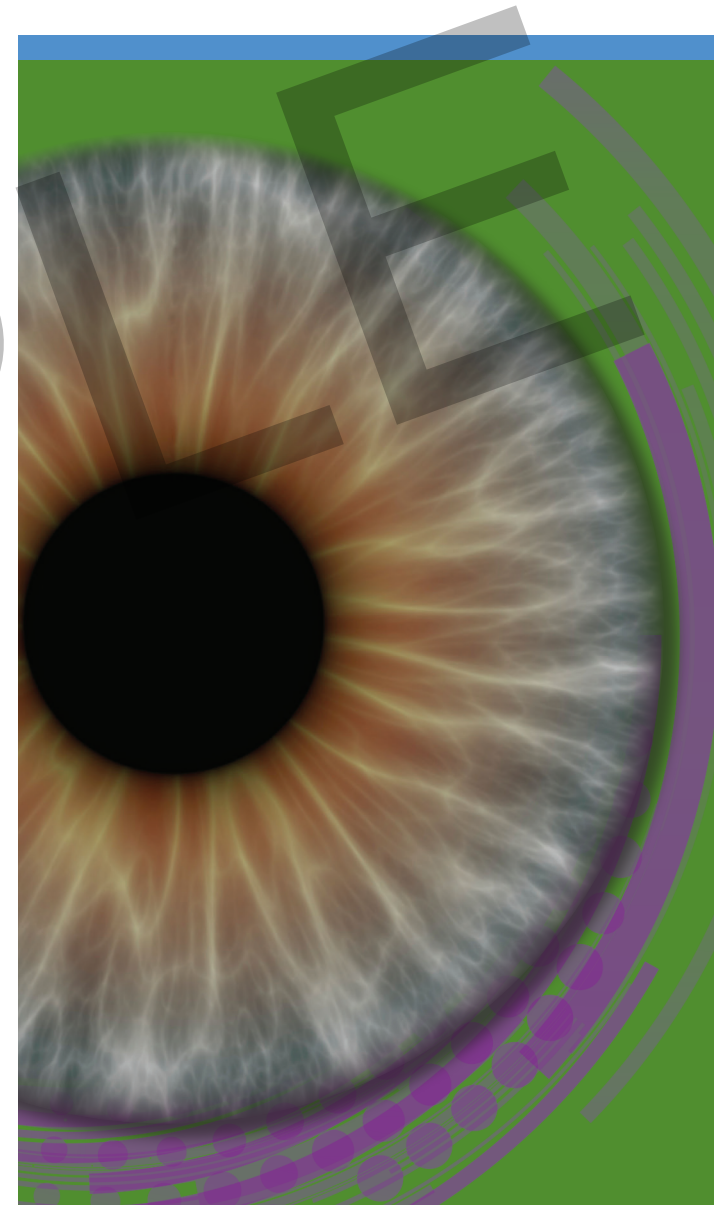




## Floaters and Flashes



### What are flashes?

Flashes can look like flashing lights or lightning streaks in your field of vision. Some people compare them to seeing "stars" after being hit on the head. You might see flashes on and off for weeks, or even months. Flashes happen when the vitreous rubs or pulls on your retina.

As people age, it is common to see flashes occasionally. Any new floaters or flashes should be examined by your ophthalmologist.

### When floaters and flashes are serious

Most floaters and flashes are not a problem. However, there are times when they can be signs of a serious condition. Here is when you should call an ophthalmologist right away:

- you notice a lot of new floaters
- you have a lot of flashes
- a shadow appears in your peripheral (side) vision
- a gray curtain covers part of your vision

These floaters and flashes could be symptoms of a torn or detached retina. This is when the retina pulls away from the back of your eye. This is a serious condition that needs to be treated.

### Flashes and migraines

Sometimes people have light flashes that look like jagged lines or heat waves. These can appear in one or both eyes and may last up to 20 minutes. This type of flash may be caused by a migraine. A migraine is a spasm of blood vessels in the brain.

When you get a headache after these flashes, it is called a "migraine headache." But sometimes you only see the light flash without having a headache. This is called an "ophthalmic migraine" or "migraine without headache."

### Summary

Floaters are dark specks or dots in your field of vision. They are shadows you see from clumps of vitreous gel in your eye. Flashes are flashes of light that look like lightning streaks in your field of vision. Flashes occur when the vitreous gel rubs or pulls on your retina.

Floaters and flashes are quite common as people age. However, they can be signs of a retinal tear or detachment. If you suddenly have a lot of floaters and see flashes, and you notice changes in your vision, call your ophthalmologist right away.

If you have any questions about your eyes or your vision, speak with your ophthalmologist. They are committed to protecting your sight.

## What are floaters?

Floaters look like small specks, dots, circles, lines or cobwebs in your field of vision. While they seem to be in front of your eye, they are floating inside. Floaters are tiny clumps of gel or cells inside the **vitreous** that fills your eye. What you see are the shadows these clumps cast on your **retina**.

You usually notice floaters when looking at something plain, like a blank wall or a blue sky.



Although floaters appear to be in front of the eye, they are actually floating in the vitreous fluid inside the eye.

## Eye Words to Know

**Retina:** Layer of nerve cells lining the back wall inside the eye. It senses light and sends signals to the brain so you can see.

**Vitreous:** Clear, gel-like substance that fills the inside of your eye.

As we age, our vitreous starts to thicken or shrink. Sometimes clumps or strands form in the vitreous. If the vitreous pulls away from the back of the eye, it is called posterior vitreous detachment. Floaters more often happen with **posterior vitreous detachment**, but you can also get them without one. They are not serious, and they tend to fade and become less noticeable over time. Severe floaters can be removed by surgery, but this has risks and is seldom necessary or recommended.

You are more likely to get floaters if you:

- are nearsighted (you need glasses to see far away)
- have had surgery for cataracts
- have had inflammation (swelling) inside the eye

The American Academy of Ophthalmology is the world's largest association of eye physicians and surgeons. A global community of 32,000 medical doctors, we protect sight and empower lives by setting the standards for ophthalmic education and advocating for our patients and the public. For more information, visit [www.aaopt.org](http://www.aaopt.org).

COMPLIMENTS OF:

Watch a floaters and flashes video from the American Academy of Ophthalmology's EyeSmart program at [aao.org/floaters-flashes-link](http://aao.org/floaters-flashes-link).

©2022 American Academy of Ophthalmology

051187-10 Academy reviewed 09/22

978-1-61525-510-8



AMERICAN ACADEMY  
OF OPHTHALMOLOGY®