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# FLOATERS & FLASHING LIGHTS

Floaters and/or flashing lights are a common, alarming complaint among patients. Floaters are dark or translucent specks, lines or cobwebs that tend to move across the field of vision. They are more noticeable when looking at a light coloured background or when the eye looks in different directions. Flashes of light are perceived as a sensation of lights similar to a starburst or lightning flash. They persist even when the eye is closed.

Floaters and flashes appear most often in older people as a result of the separation of the *vitreous* from the *retina*. The vitreous is a clear, gel-like substance inside the eye. As a person ages, the vitreous tends to shrink and pull away from the surface of the retina, a thin, light sensitive layer of tissue. This separation of the vitreous from the retina may cause clumping and tugging inside the eye resulting in floaters and flashes. In most cases, this is not a dangerous occurrence. Statistics indicate that 50% of all people over 50 have had the vitreous separate from the retina. However, in a small percentage of cases, it can pull a part of the retina along with it causing a tear or hole in the retina. Once the retina is

damaged, a retinal detachment can occur resulting in severe and rapid vision loss if not treated immediately.

The most common symptoms of retinal tears or detachments are:

- **New floaters** – it is normal to have some floaters, but a sudden increase should be investigated
- **Flashes** – a sudden appearance of flashes may indicate that the vitreous gel is pulling on the retina
- **Dark shadow or curtain over vision** – retinal detachments are often accompanied by the appearance of a growing shadow from any direction
- **Decreased vision** – a sudden decrease in vision may indicate a retinal tear or detachment

Most of the time, serious problems such as retinal detachments do not develop when the vitreous separates from the retina. However, without examination, there is no way for a person to determine whether his or her symptoms are serious. We strongly recommend an examination by an optometrist or ophthalmologist to evaluate any sudden appearance of new flashes or floaters. It could save your vision!

