

Floater and Flashing Lights

Table of Contents

- Overview
 - Floater
 - Flashing Lights
- Screening and Diagnosis
- Causes
 - Floater
 - Flashes
- Complications
- Treatment
- Living with Floater
- Getting your Care at KP

Overview

Floater and flashing lights are visual symptoms experienced by many people. A common aspect of the normal aging process, most of the time they are harmless;. Sometimes, however, the presence of persistent and increasing floater or flashing lights might indicate a retinal condition, which should be treated promptly to keep your visual acuity intact. That is why it is important to notice and keep track of your symptoms and, if they worsen, get a detailed retinal checkup to prevent complications.

Floater



Floater are small specks or particles floating inside the eye which may take on a variety of shapes and sizes. They look like gnats, threads, dots, circles, lines or cobwebs in your field of vision. They drift about; they seem to move as your eyes move and then dart away when you try to focus on them. They can become apparent when you look at something bright, such as white paper or a blue sky. They become bothersome when they become numerous or more prominent. Floater are more likely to develop as we age and are more common in people who are very nearsighted, have diabetes, or who have had eye surgery.

Flashing Lights

Flashing lights or “flashes” may appear as either quick or long bursts of light that go on and off in your eye or seem to be off to one side of your field of vision. You may have experienced this same sensation if you have ever been hit in the eye and seen “stars”. Flashes are most commonly seen when looking at a low-lit background or in total darkness. They tend to occur in one eye at a time and persist even when the eye is closed. The flashes of light can appear off and on for several weeks or months.

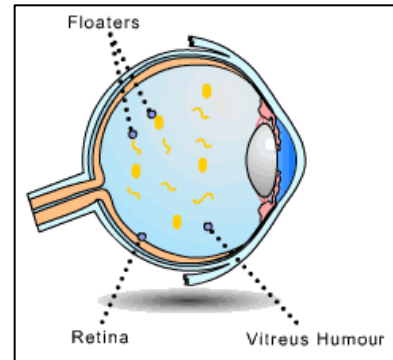


Screening and Diagnosis

Diagnosing floaters and flashing lights can be done by listening as you describe your symptoms and then by examining your eye.

Causes

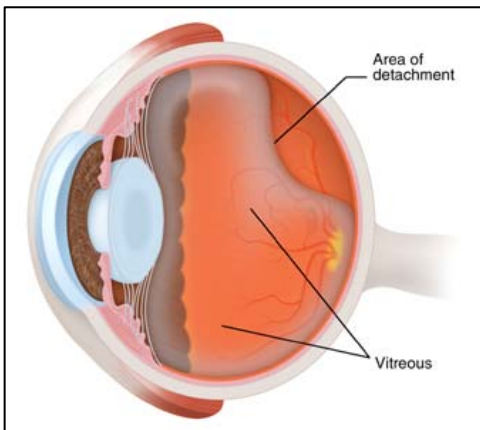
The inner part of the eye is made up of a clear, jelly-like fluid known as the vitreous. The vitreous helps maintain the shape of the eye and allows light to pass through the retina. **Floaters** are small clumps of gel that form in the vitreous. As we grow older, the vitreous shrinks or becomes more liquid. As it shrinks it tugs on the retina, which creates a sensation of **flashing lights**. Floaters and flashers are a normal part of the aging process and are not usually cause for alarm.



Floaters

In most cases, **floaters** are part of the natural aging process and are simply an annoyance. They can be distracting at first, but eventually tend to "settle" at the bottom of the eye, becoming less bothersome. They usually settle below the line of sight and do not go away completely.

Floaters may also be associated with:



- Small flecks of protein or other matter trapped during the formation of the eye before birth.
- Natural deterioration of the vitreous fluid as part of the natural aging process. This is called a **posterior vitreous detachment**. This can also occur after laser treatments or surgery for cataracts or diabetic retinopathy. This process occurs more often in people who are nearsighted.
- Certain eye diseases or injuries such as **diabetic retinopathy, retinal tears, retinal detachment, infection, inflammation (uveitis), and hemorrhaging**.

Flashes

Flashes are associated with the same things that cause floaters. However, they can also be associated with migraine headaches. Flashes of light appear as jagged lines or "heat waves" in both eyes and can last for 10-20 minutes. If a headache follows the flashes, it is called a **migraine headache**. However, if there is no subsequent headache, the flashes of light are known as **ocular migraines**. If you think you are experiencing migraine headaches, make an appointment to see your primary care physician.

Complications

Most of the time, floaters and flashes do not indicate any serious eye problem. However flashes that occur suddenly and/or many new floaters in the eye, could be symptoms of a retinal tear or Retinal Detachment. If you experience either of these symptoms and/or an area in your field of vision seems to be blocked or blacked out, request an urgent appointment with an Ophthalmologist in our department; if you have a decrease in vision or obstruction in your peripheral vision, you may be advised to directly to the Emergency Department if it is after hours or on a weekend.

Treatment

Normally there is no need to treat floaters or flashes unless they are a sign of a retinal tear or detachment. Flashing lights from a vitreous detachment will usually diminish over a period of several weeks. Flashing lights from an ocular migraine may recur with another episode of a migraine.

Living with Floaters

You may find that floaters initially interfere with your vision. New floaters are like new water spots on a window. Initially, they can be very noticeable; but, over time, your eyes learn to look through the water spots in the window and you do not notice them anymore. In this same way, the floaters will become less noticeable as your brain learns to "see through" them over a period of several weeks to several months.

If a floater appears directly in your line of sight, moving your eyes around will cause the vitreous to swirl around and move the floater out of the way. Looking up and down rather than back and forth will cause different currents inside the eye and may be more effective in getting the floater out of the way.

Please call our Call Center to make an appointment to see us in Ophthalmology

- If you suddenly develop floaters
- If there is any change in the quantity or size of existing floaters in your eye.
- If you have a family history of eye problems or Retinal Detachment
- If have had an eye injury or a history of a retinal detachment

Getting your Care at KP

You can make an appointment with one of our Ophthalmologists by calling our call center (415) 833-2200. The call center can also put you through to an advice nurse if you need immediate advice about your eye. Our advice nurses are available 24/7.

You can also email your doctor through our web site www.kp.org. Once you have registered for a user ID, you can access your prescription information, look at your lab results, view summaries from previous doctor's visits as well as send a message to your physician.