

FLASHES & FLOATERS

Always consult your optometrist if you experience flashes or floaters in your vision, regardless of whether they come and go or are permanent.

Floaters are protein debris floating in the jelly of your eyes, whereas flashes are your eye being artificially stimulated by eye movements or eye inflammation. It is important your optometrist establishes exactly what the causes are of these flashes and/or floaters.

The jelly of your eye, where your floaters live is called the vitreous, and vitreous floaters can be harmless arising from an ageing eye and a shrinking vitreous or can herald the beginning of either vitreous detachment or worse still retinal detachment.

What is the vitreous?

The inside of the eyeball is filled with a jelly-like substance, like the white of an egg, and is crystal clear. The vitreous supports the structure of the eye, providing a transparent medium for light to pass through and focus on the back of your eye. It feeds and keeps the retina in place, which is the thin film at the back of the eye that receives the images of your world around you.

What are floaters?

When the vitreous either pulls away from the back of the eye or where the jelly becomes more liquid, protein debris can be thrown into the jelly like void, which then cast tiny shadows on the back of your eyes. These protein floaters can appear as dots, flies, blobs or cobwebs. Floaters never go away but can either shrink or float to the bottom of the eye where they can no longer be seen.

What are flashes of light?

When the vitreous pulls away from the back of the eye or simply 'tugs' on the retina at the back of the eye, it is perceived as a flash of light. These flashes can be a meniscus of light in the edge of your vision or even flashes like lightning! Flashes of light often diminish as the pulling of the vitreous on the retina subsides.

What should I do?

You must have your eyes checked if you experience floaters sooner rather than later, however if you have symptoms of floaters and flashes, then you should see your optometrist within 48 hours. This may result in a diagnosis of vitreous retinal detachment which requires no treatment however should be monitored annually. A vitreous detachment can be associated with a retinal tear which can develop into a retinal detachment which would require urgent hospital treatment and likely, a repair operation on your retina.

It is important for you to know the symptoms of retinal detachment. The signs of retinal detachment are:

- A dramatic increase or shower of floaters and/or flashing lights
- A curtain effect across your vision
- A dark shadow in your vision

