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Floaters

Floaters are translucent specks that seem to float about in your field of vision. Most people have some floaters normally, but they usually do not notice them until they become more numerous or more prominent.

Looking like cobwebs or squiggly lines or floating bugs, floaters become apparent when you look at something evenly bright, such as a white paper or a blue sky, and are more evident when you move your eyes. They are especially noticeable when looking through an optical instrument, such as a microscope or binoculars. They are more common and seem to be more annoying to people who are nearsighted.

What are those floating specks?

The eye is filled with a gelatinous substance called vitreous (looks like egg whites). Sometimes it is not clear from birth on and we can see floaters. These are clumps of protein casting a shadow on the retina ("film" of the eye)

As your eyes age, the vitreous may become stringy, and the strands cast more shadows on the retina. Floaters may also come from old or new bleeding within the eye. They may be the result of a disease that causes opaque deposits in the vitreous or of an ocular inflammation that causes cellular debris, or they may be residual from an old injury.

Are floaters a serious problem?

In most cases floaters are simply an annoyance. An eye examination will usually reveal if there's something serious that needs medical attention. The sudden appearance of new floaters, sometimes accompanied by apparent flashes of light in the peripheral (side) vision, can be a sign that a vitreous detachment has occurred, a frequent consequence of aging that is not usually serious. On rare occasions, these symptoms can be a dangerous sign that a retinal tear has occurred. The only way to diagnose the actual cause of the problem is by a complete eye examination. Retinal tears can lead to a more serious retinal detachment. Applying laser to a tear will reduce the risk of a retinal detachment.

Can floaters be treated?

Whenever floaters interfere with vision, you can shift them out of your line of sight by moving your eyes around quickly, side to side or up and down.

The only way to get floaters out of the vitreous gel is by surgical removal. This is usually not recommended.

Most people learn to ignore the floaters. Over time they may fall out of the line of vision.