

FLOATERS

What are floaters?

Floaters are thread-like shapes that float in front of the vision in one or both eyes. They are most noticeable when looking at a blank surface such as a wall or blank piece of paper. Floaters are small bits of debris that float in the jelly like substance called vitreous at the back of the eye. They may also look like spots, cobwebs or squiggly lines. They are more common in myopic or short sighted people and tend to increase with age.

What causes floaters?

The back of the eye is filled with a jelly called vitreous. With age, the jelly can start to break down. Some of the solid parts of the jelly cast a shadow on the retina and we see this as floaters.

Some people may also experience a Posterior Vitreous Detachment (PVD) which is where the jelly begins to shrink and pull away from the retina. As this happens they may see intermittent flashes of light which lasts from 4 to 12 weeks or possibly longer. When a PVD occurs it is not unusual to see a large cobweb or curtain like floater which may obstruct vision.

Inflammation in the eye is a rare cause of floaters.

What complications can occur?

In most cases, floaters are harmless and part of the normal aging process. Usually the brain will adapt to the floater and it will become less obvious as time passes.

Occasionally when a PVD develops there is a 10% chance the vitreous jelly can get stuck and pull on the retina creating a tear. If a tear happens, there is a 50% chance another tear can develop. If this occurs there is a 1 in 3 chance of subsequent retinal detachment. This is where fluid tracks underneath the retina and causes it to lift or detach. It is often associated with a shower of floaters and flashing light persisting even in the daytime. Vision may also be affected. This is an emergency that needs to be checked by a doctor within 24 hours.

Treatment Options

As floaters themselves are not harmful, it is generally recommended that they are not treated. It is possible to have an operation called a vitrectomy which removes the vitreous and floaters from the back of the eye however this would only be considered in severe cases.

What are the risks of surgery?

Vitrectomy surgery carries a range of risks and for this reason is not usually recommended as treatment for floaters.

Surgery may cause a cataract to develop prematurely ie within 2-3 years of the procedure. This is particularly a problem for younger patients.

There is a possibility that surgery could cause blindness from bleeding or infection. The risk

is small but should be considered.

4% of patients may have a retinal detachment after surgery which would require further surgery and potential loss of vision.

Please contact Dr KL Lee if you have any questions:

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