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## VITREOUS FLOATERS

Black spots that drift about within your field of vision are called **vitreous floaters**. In and of themselves, vitreous floaters are not harmful and do not cause visual loss. Vitreous floaters can occur at any time, but are more common with age. In fact, almost everyone has experienced vitreous floaters at one time or another. Besides aging, floaters may be caused by minor trauma such as rubbing of the eyes, and dehydration. The purpose of this presentation is to provide background information regarding the causes and significance of vitreous floaters. Please keep this presentation for your reference.

The vitreous gel is a transparent jelly-like material that fills the inside of the eye. Light rays pass through the vitreous gel before reaching an important and sensitive tissue inside the eye called the retina. The retina is a delicate structure that lines the inside of the eye and serves to translate light into nerve impulses. The retina is comparable to film in a camera but is as thin and as delicate as wet tissue paper.

The vitreous gel is usually crystal clear, but occasionally it condenses to form clumps or strands that interfere with the passage of light rays. This process is known as vitreous syneresis. If the condensed material (floater) comes near your line of vision, the shadows they cast on the retina appear as dark spots or irregular lines. The retina does not feel pain. However, because of its exquisite sensitivity, any tugging on the retina by movements of the vitreous gel is perceived as flashes of light. These flashes are usually brief, usually in the shape of an arc, and may be quite startling. The flashes of light do not necessarily indicate damage to the retina, but are a warning that the vitreous gel is pulling away from the retina. Injury to the retina may occur if the vitreous pull on the retina is so strong as to cause a tear or detachment of the retina. Warning symptoms of a retinal problem include seeing a shower of black spots in your visual field, often associated with brilliant flashes of light. As a retinal detachment progresses one may notice a black or gray curtain across the vision. Contact our office immediately if any of these symptoms develop. A complete eye exam with dilation of the pupils will insure that there is nothing seriously wrong with your eyes.

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To put things in perspective, almost everyone experiences the signs of vitreous gel syneresis, but very few patients (less than one percent) develop a retinal tear or detachment. Nevertheless, at the first sign of vitreous floaters or flashes, you should have a complete eye examination. If the eye examination reveals that the vitreous is undergoing this expected syneresis and separation from the retina, you should restrict all vigorous activity for about one month to allow the gel to separate from the retina as gently as possible.

Assuming that the symptoms do not worsen in any way, a dilated exam of the eyes is repeated after one month or so, depending on the initial severity. Once the gel is completely separated from the retina, you are “home-free” – the flashes stop, the retina is out of danger, and the floaters eventually dissolve or are absorbed. Eye exams are then performed on an annual basis.

In summary, vitreous floaters are very common and usually do not indicate a serious problem. Floaters and light flashes indicate syneresis of the vitreous gel. This eventually occurs to almost everyone and once it occurs in one eye, it usually follows in the other eye within two years. The incidence of serious complications involving the retina is less than one percent. An exam immediately following symptoms and again when indicated will insure that there has been no damage to the retina.

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