

Spots & Floaters

Do you occasionally see specks or threadlike strands drifting across your field of vision? Then, when you try to look at them, do they seem to dart away? If so, you're seeing what eye care practitioners call spots or floaters.

While almost everyone sees a few spots at one time or another, they can occur more frequently and become more noticeable as you grow older. If you notice a sudden change in the number or size of spots, you should contact your eye practitioner right away so you can be sure they are not the result of a more serious problem.

What are spots or floaters?

Spots are small, semi-transparent or cloudy specks or particles within the eye that become noticeable when they fall within the line of sight. They may also appear with flashes of light.

What causes them?

The inner part of your eye is made up of a clear, jelly-like fluid known as the vitreous. Occasionally, small flecks of protein and other matter become trapped during the formation of the eye before birth and remain in the eyes' vitreous body, resulting in the spots.

When flashes of light occur causing spots to become noticeable, it can be a result of the jelly-like vitreous shrinking and pulling on the retina. This tugging action stimulates the retinal receptor cells to "fire," causing the perception of light flashes.

Can these spots cause blindness?

Most spots are normal and rarely cause blindness. But spots can indicate more serious problems. If you notice a change in the number and size of spots, a comprehensive eye examination is in order to determine the cause.

On rare occasions, vitreous detachment can cause small tears or holes in the retina. The damaged part of the retina subsequently does not work properly and a blind or blurred spot in vision results. If untreated, retinal tears or holes can continue to worsen and severe vision loss can result if the retina becomes detached.

How are spots diagnosed?

In a comprehensive eye examination, your eye care practitioner will look into your eyes with special instruments that allow an examination of the health of the inside of your eyes and possible observation of the spots.

This is often done after the practitioner puts special drops in your eyes to make the pupils larger (called dilation) to allow a larger view of the inside of your eyes. These

procedures provide your eye practitioner with relevant information to detect spots.

How are spots treated?

While flashes and floaters are normally not serious or treatable, they can be symptoms or signs of either vitreous or retinal detachment. In either of these cases, treatment with lasers and/or surgical intervention may be necessary to preserve your vision. If you notice a sudden increase or change in the number and type of spots and floaters, contact your eye care practitioner immediately.