

FLASHES, FLOATERS AND VITREOUS DETACHMENT

FACT SHEET

What are they?

Floater, sometimes called spots, are small, semi-transparent or cloudy particles that float within the vitreous, the clear, jelly-like fluid that fills the inner portion of the eye. Floaters are usually harmless, and are seen by many of us at one time or another.

They generally look like translucent specks of various shapes and sizes or like cobwebs. They are frequently visible when looking at a plain lighted background like a blank pastel wall, a blue sky or the white pages of a book. Floaters become visible when they fall within the line of sight and cast a shadow on the retina (the light sensitive portion of the back of the eye).

What causes them?

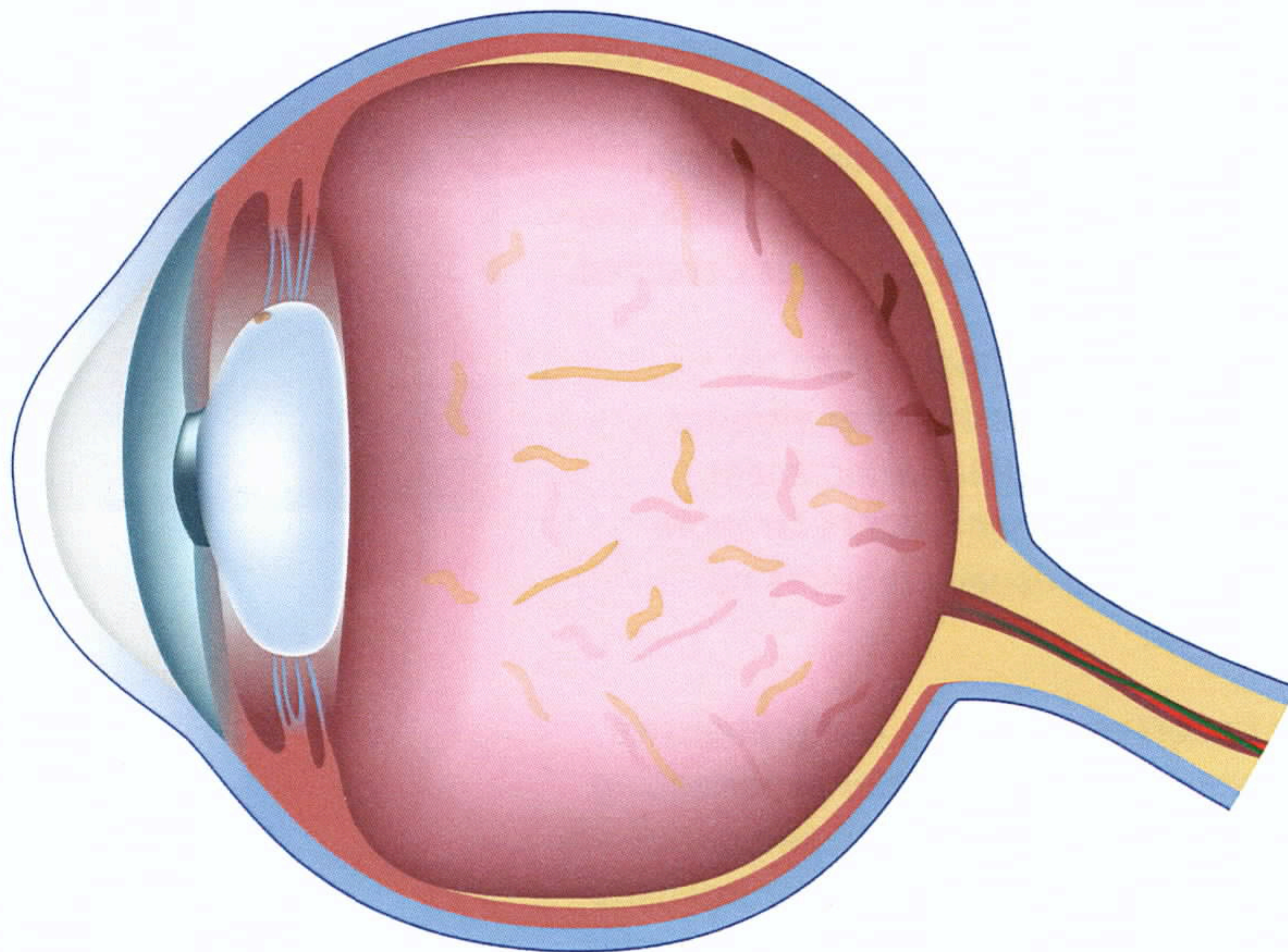
There are a number of possible causes for floaters. They may be small flecks of protein or other matter that were trapped during the formation of the eyes before birth and remain suspended in the clear fluid of the vitreous.

Deterioration of the vitreous fluid may also cause floaters to develop. This can be part of the natural aging process and is often not serious, though it can be very annoying. Also, certain eye diseases or injuries can cause floaters.

Sometimes flashes or streaks of light may appear. This may be happening because the jelly-like vitreous is shrinking and pulling on the retina. The retinal receptor cells are stimulated to "fire" by this tugging action and cause the perception of light flashes.

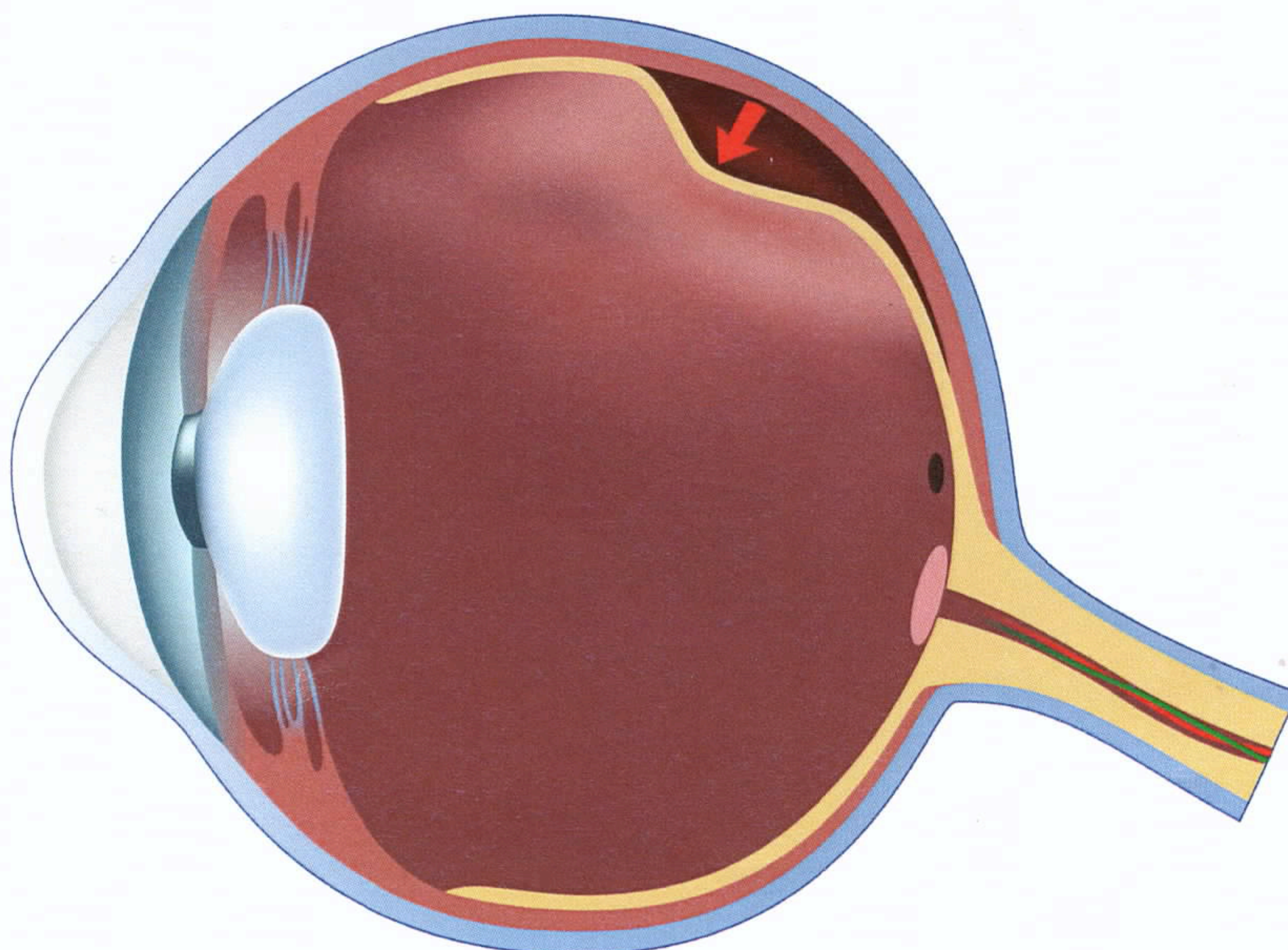
What can happen?

Vitreous shrinkage can continue and result in a part of the vitreous actually



Floater, small semi-transparent or cloudy particles that are suspended in your eyes, are usually harmless and are seen by many of us at one time or another; however, flashes or the appearance of streaks of light can be symptoms or signs of vitreous or retinal detachment and should be immediately seen by your optometrist.

Above: Eye with normal floaters. Below: Eye with vitreous detachment.



becoming detached or peeled away from the back of the eye. Flashes, floaters and vitreous detachment are common and seldom lead to serious eye problems.

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.

While flashes and floaters can be symptoms or signs of either vitreous detachment or retinal detachment, vitreous involvement occurs far more frequently and usually requires no treatment.

It is important to have a comprehensive eye examination soon after experiencing flashes or floaters, or if you become aware of an increase in the number or intensity of flashes or floaters. In a comprehensive eye examination, your doctor of optometry can use a variety of special instruments to look at the vitreous, the retina and the other interior parts of the eyes to determine the causes of the flashes and floaters that you see.



Floaters and spots can be light or dark, appearing as specs or stringy lines.

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