



**National Eye Institute**  
National Institutes of Health Research Today...Vision Tomorrow



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[Home](#) » [Health Information](#) » [Floaters](#) » [Facts About Floaters](#)

## Facts About Floaters

This information was developed by the National Eye Institute to help patients and their families search for general information about floaters. An eye care professional who has examined the patient's eyes and is familiar with his or her medical history is the best person to answer specific questions.

### Table of Contents

- [Floaters Defined](#)
  - [What are floaters?](#)
- [Frequently Asked Questions about Floaters](#)
  - [Floaters and Retinal Detachment](#)
- [Causes and Risks Factors](#)
  - [What causes floaters?](#)
  - [Who is at risk for floaters?](#)
- [Symptoms and Detection](#)
- [Treatment](#)
  - [How are floaters treated?](#)
- [More Information](#)

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- [About NEI](#)
- [Health Information](#)
- [News and Events](#)
- [Research Funding](#)
- [Research at NEI](#)
- [Education Programs](#)
- [Jobs](#)
- [Training](#)
- [Resources](#)
- [A-Z Sitemap](#)

- [E-mail to a friend](#)
- [Order NEI Materials](#)
- [Information in Spanish](#)  
(Información en español)

## Floaters Defined

### What are floaters?

Floaters are little "cobwebs" or specks that float about in your field of vision. They are small, dark, shadowy shapes that can look like spots, thread-like strands, or squiggly lines. They move as your eyes move and seem to dart away when you try to look at them directly. They do not follow your eye movements precisely, and usually drift when your eyes stop moving.

Most people have floaters and learn to ignore them; they are usually not noticed until they become numerous or more prominent. Floaters can become apparent when looking at something bright, such as white paper or a blue sky.

## Frequently Asked Questions about Floaters

### Floaters and Retinal Detachment

Sometimes a section of the vitreous pulls the fine fibers away from the retina all at once, rather than gradually, causing many new floaters to appear suddenly. This is called a [vitreous detachment](#), which in most cases is not sight-threatening and requires no treatment.

However, a sudden increase in floaters, possibly accompanied by light flashes or peripheral (side) vision loss, could indicate a retinal detachment. A retinal detachment occurs when any part of the retina, the eye's light-sensitive tissue, is lifted or pulled from its normal position at the back wall of the eye.

**A retinal detachment is a serious condition and should always be considered an emergency.** If left untreated, it can lead to permanent visual impairment within two or three days or even blindness in the eye.

Those who experience a sudden increase in floaters, flashes of light in peripheral vision, or a loss of peripheral vision should have an eye care professional examine their eyes as soon as possible.

## Causes and Risk Factors

### What causes floaters?

Floaters occur when the vitreous, a gel-like substance that fills about 80 percent of the eye and helps it maintain a round shape, slowly shrinks.

As the vitreous shrinks, it becomes somewhat stringy, and the strands can cast tiny shadows on the retina. These are

floaters.

In most cases, floaters are part of the natural aging process and simply an annoyance. They can be distracting at first, but eventually tend to "settle" at the bottom of the eye, becoming less bothersome. They usually settle below the line of sight and do not go away completely.

However, there are other, more serious causes of floaters, including infection, inflammation (uveitis), hemorrhaging, retinal tears, and injury to the eye.

### Who is at risk for floaters?

Floaters are more likely to develop as we age and are more common in people who are very nearsighted, have diabetes, or who have had a cataract operation.

### Symptoms and Detection

Floaters are little "cobwebs" or specks that float about in your field of vision. They are small, dark, shadowy shapes that can look like spots, thread-like strands, or squiggly lines. They move as your eyes move and seem to dart away when you try to look at them directly. They do not follow your eye movements precisely, and usually drift when your eyes stop moving.

### Treatment

#### How are floaters treated?

For people who have floaters that are simply annoying, no treatment is recommended.

On rare occasions, floaters can be so dense and numerous that they significantly affect vision. In these cases, a vitrectomy, a surgical procedure that removes floaters from the vitreous, may be needed.

A vitrectomy removes the vitreous gel, along with its floating debris, from the eye. The vitreous is replaced with a salt solution. Because the vitreous is mostly water, you will not notice any change between the salt solution and the original vitreous.

This operation carries significant risks to sight because of possible complications, which include retinal detachment, retinal tears, and cataract. Most eye surgeons are reluctant to recommend this surgery unless the floaters seriously interfere with vision.

### More Information

- [Tips on Talking to Your Doctor](#)
- [How to Find an Eye Care Professional](#)

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The National Eye Institute (NEI) is part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and is the Federal government's lead agency for vision research that leads to sight-saving treatments and plays a key role in reducing visual impairment and blindness.

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National Eye Institute  
31 Center Drive MSC 2510  
Bethesda, MD 20892-2510  
(301) 496-5248  
[www.nei.nih.gov](http://www.nei.nih.gov)

For mapping or direction purposes use:  
9000 Rockville Pike  
Bethesda, MD 20892

NEI Website Header Description: Confocal image of rat RPE layer two weeks after laser. A well-defined neovascular membrane labeled with Isolectin Ib4 (red) is detected below proliferating RPE cells (Phalloidin in green). New vessels are growing toward the subretinal space.