RANZCO The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists
THE LEADERS IN COLLABORATIVE EYE CARE

FLOATERS AND FLASHES

ONLINE PATIENT ADVISORY

This leaflet is intended to provide you with general information. It is not a substitute for advice from your ophthalmologist. You are encouraged to discuss the benefits and risks of treatment with your ophthalmologist. This is an abridged version of the RANZCO patient education pamphlet: Floaters and flashes – a guide for patients. The complete pamphlet is available from your ophthalmologist.

By middle age, most people see small dark shapes that appear to float in their field of vision. These are called floaters. They are particles in the vitreous body, a jelly-like substance that fills the inside of the eye. The vitreous body is attached to the retina, the layer of light-sensitive tissue at the back of the eye. Floaters appear because they cast shadows on the retina.

Small flashes of light may be seen with or without floaters. Flashes are usually caused by the vitreous body tugging on the retina. This tugging occurs when the vitreous body shrinks with age. When the shrinking vitreous body separates from the retina, this is called a posterior vitreous detachment (PVD).

Floaters and flashes are usually just annoying, not harmful. However, the sudden onset of many new floaters or flashes could be a warning of looming serious eye problems, including tears of the retina or a detached retina.

Your medical history

Your ophthalmologist needs to know your medical history to plan the best treatment for you. Tell your ophthalmologist about health problems you have. Some may interfere with treatment, anaesthesia and recovery.

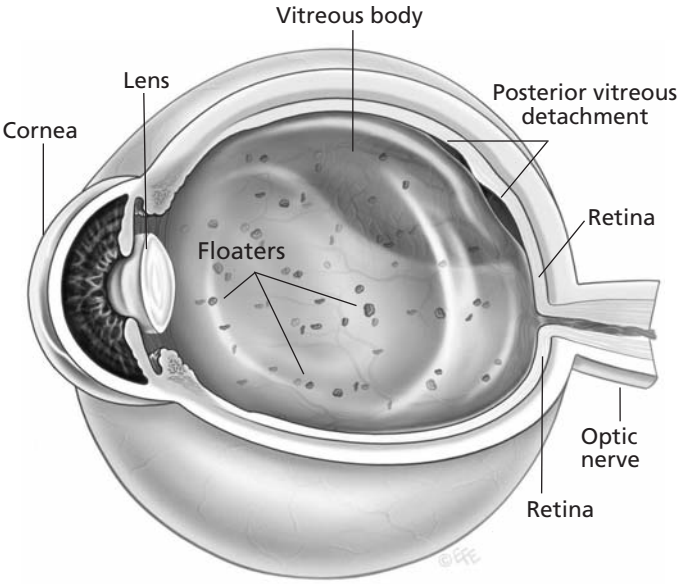
A decision to have treatment

As you make the decision whether to have treatment, make sure that you understand the risks, benefits and limitations of treatment. If you do not have treatment, your symptoms and condition may continue to worsen.

If you have any questions, ask your ophthalmologist.

Anaesthesia

Surgical treatment of floaters and flashes is usually performed under local anaesthesia.



Floaters and posterior vitreous detachment (PVD) may occur as a normal part of the ageing process. Numerous floaters can occur in the vitreous body, as shown above.

Treatment of floaters

Large and persistent floaters that obstruct vision can be surgically removed during a procedure known as vitrectomy. This is the use of special instruments to remove the floaters, along with some or all of the vitreous body. The vitreous is usually replaced with a clear salt solution; or rarely, with synthetic gas or silicon oil. In select cases, a new treatment using a YAG laser may be able to dissolve floaters by vitreolysis.

Treatment of flashes

Light flashes do not need treatment if the retina is intact. If a retinal tear is present, early treatment to seal it can prevent retinal detachment. Treatments include:

- Laser treatment (photocoagulation) – the laser beam is focused on the area to be treated. As tiny burns made with the laser heal, the scar tissue seals the tear.
- Freezing treatment (cryotherapy) – a probe is applied to the outside of the eye. Extreme cold freezes through to the retinal tear. The scar tissue seals the tear.

Possible risks and complications

Surgical treatment of floaters and flashes is safe and effective, but does have risks of complications. These are more fully outlined in the complete RANZCO patient education pamphlet and should be discussed with your ophthalmologist.

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