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OPTOMETRISTS – CONTACT LENSES

FLASHES AND FLOATERS

Many people, particularly if they are short sighted, complain of seeing small spots or ‘floaters’ in front of their eyes. They can be noticed at any age but seem to become more numerous in later life. They are often described as “flies” or “like a net or spiders web” of different shapes and sizes which appear to float around. They move when you move your eyes and are normally more obvious when you are looking at a plain bright background (like a cloudless sky). They are occasionally accompanied by flashes of light.

Most floaters are unimportant, but sometimes they can indicate a more serious problem. If become aware of new floaters or experience flashing lights in your peripheral vision, particularly if they seem to start suddenly, then you need to be reviewed as a matter of urgency to determine the cause.

What are the causes of flashes and floaters?

The main cause is the ageing process in the eye. The inside of the eyeball is filled with a “jelly-like” substance called the vitreous gel or humor, which is connected to the retina. As we get older the vitreous gel changes, becoming more liquid. Sometimes the gel also shrinks and may pull away from the retina, particularly at the back of the eye. You may also experience episodes of flashing lights, which may be caused by the vitreous pulling on the retina as it separates from it. This is not a painful condition and is called a Posterior Vitreous Detachment (P.V.D). P.V.D.’s are quite common, occurring in about 50 per cent of people over the age of 60 years.

What should I do?

In 90% of cases floaters or a P.V.D. are harmless and do not require any treatment. However, occasionally, as the vitreous separates from the retina it can result in a small tear or hole in the retina which may be a serious problem, as retinal detachment could follow. Retinal detachments, which can present as symptoms of a shadow or curtain coming across the vision, require urgent treatment. For this reason, if you experience any symptoms of new floaters or flashing lights, it is very important to have your eyes checked immediately by either an optometrist or an ophthalmologist (eye doctor).

Both your eyes will be examined, even if you only have symptoms in one. In order to enable us to do a full examination of your retina, it will be necessary to have eye drops put in to dilate your pupils. These drops will blur your vision for 3-4 hours afterwards. For this reason you are advised not to drive until your vision has returned to normal.

Is treatment necessary?

If no hole or tear is found in the retina then no treatment is required.

The floaters will gradually settle down although they may not disappear completely and can sometimes be annoying. However, most people find that with time, the floaters become less and less of a problem.

If there is a problem with your retina this needs to be treated quickly.

What if the symptoms change?

If your symptoms change, your eyes will need to be checked again, even if you have been seen very recently. Please contact your optometrist or nearest eye clinic promptly if you notice any of the following;

- A sudden increase in the number of floaters.
- An increase in the flashing lights.
- A dark shadow or curtain across your vision.

There are 24 hour emergency eye services available at Moorfields Eye Hospital, City Road and The Western Eye Hospital, Marylebone Road.

Please remember:

- **Floaters, flashing lights or a P.V.D are very common and not harmful**
- **A Retinal Detachment is more serious but rarely occurs.**

It is important to have your eyes checked immediately to establish exactly what has happened. For the majority of people who experience floaters or flashing lights, there are no serious associated retinal problems and no treatment is necessary, but it is very important to establish quickly that the retina is intact and that no emergency treatment is indicated.