Article published on February 5th 2012 | Business

Often patients will visit their eye doctor worried as they have encountered a change in their eyesight. They have suddenly started to notice "dark spots" in their side vision that seems to float. In most cases, these dark spots are what we call â€œfloatersâ€•. What is even more important, floaters can be a sign of a serious eye problem and, thus, eye doctors carefully investigate the cause of an onset of floaters â€“ especially if it is a sudden onset. But what are floaters, how do they start, what causes them, and what can be done

about them?A fibrous gel known as vitreous humor makes up two-thirds of the eye. The vitreous is tightly adhered to the retina â€“ which lines the back of the eye (a light-sensitive layer at the back of the eye) similar to how film is in the back of a camera. Floaters typically appear when areas of this gel pulls away from the inner back portion of the retina. Portions of the gel clump together, casting a shadow on the retina under certain lighting conditions. Floaters move when the eye moves, creating an impression that they are drifting.

One reason for the development of floaters has to do with changes in the vitreous humor. With time, the vitreous humor transitions from a gel to a liquid, "causing the gel to collapse into itself and pull away from the retina." Even though floaters are common in most people, there are exceptions. A sudden shower of floaters and light flashes â€“ in one eye - could be a sign of another condition, such as the detachment of the vitreous humor from the retina or a more serous problem, detachment of the retina itself from the back of the eye. When the retina is detaching, action must be taken as soon as possible by an eye surgeon to

prevent permanent vision loss.

For this reason, it is important that an eye doctor investigates the sudden onset of floaters with flashes and perhaps a loss of side vision, no matter what the age of the patient is. An eye doctor can conduct this investigation through a dilated retinal exam and by taking retinal photographs. This exams will allow the eye doctor to assess whether or not there is a retinal hole, tear or detachment.

Most floaters, however, are harmless. True, they may be annoying when one becomes aware they are there. When the eye is exposed to a bright light, clear sky, or even a computer screen, floaters may become particularly pronounced. Is there something that can be done about them? Although surgery can be carried on, eye doctors are willing to perform such surgeries only when vision is severely compromised. Most times, time is the best answer.

"Many [floaters] will fade over time and become less bothersome." Interestingly, this is often due to gravity, which allows the floaters to settle below the line of sight, where floaters will go unnoticed.

Having your routine eye exam can help diagnose serious problems early on. An eye doctor will take the necessary steps to investigate the symptoms and their causes. Indeed, taking care of your eye sight is of vital importance. Also, remember to visit your eye doctor if you suddenly see new floaters.

Article Source:
http://www.articleside.com/business-articles/what-are-floaters-how-do-they-start-what-can-be-done.htm - Article Side

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Article Keywords:
Optometrist in El Sobrante CA,Eye Doctor in El Sobrante CA

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