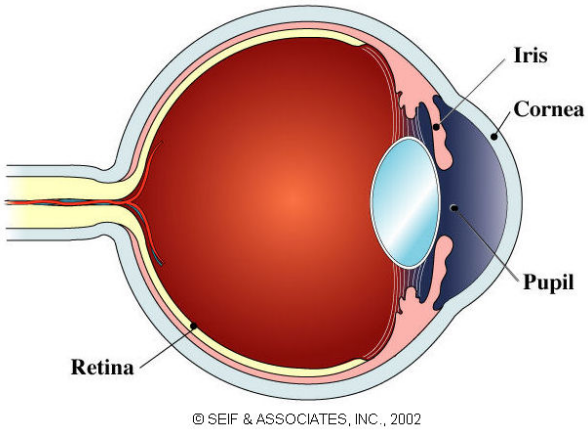
Photopsia
(Seeing Flashing Lights)

Photopsia is when a person can see flashes of light (like lightening flashes) off to the side in one or both eyes. Although photopsia often goes away with time, it can cause serious problems that need help right away.

CAUSES



- The retina is being pulled on by the jelly-like fluid (*vitreous*) inside the eye. This may happen due to aging changes. The retinal nerves fire impulses when they are pulled on. These impulses are seen as flashes of lights. If no damage is done to the retina during this phase, the flashes eventually go away.
- Changes that may lead to a slowly forming retinal detachment.
  - Sometimes, the pulling on the retina by the vitreous can cause a hole or a break in the retina. If fluid gets through the hole and under the retina, the retina may lift up or "detach" from its normal position. This can cause vision loss. A retinal detachment must be diagnosed and treated right away.
- Migraine headaches.
  - Photopsia may also happen just before a migraine headache starts. In this case, there is no damage or threat to the eyes. The flashes will go away when the headache is over.
- Seeing things that are not really there (*hallucinations*) due to certain drugs.
- Rare diseases inside the layers of the eye (Punctate Inner Choroiditis or other inflammations).

SYMPTOMS

- Flashes of light seen suddenly off to the side in one or both eyes. This is usually noticed more in the dark.
- Floating dark spots (*floaters*) that look like insects or cobwebs moving in front of the eye and interfere with vision. Floaters are usually noticed in bright light or when looking at a flat, lightly colored surface (like a white wall). This symptom is a result of a retinal tear. The retina is being pulled by the vitreous and small blood vessels on the retina may bleed into the vitreous. This is an emergency. The eyes should be looked at right away.
- A small floating circle may be seen directly in front of your vision. This can sometimes be seen when the vitreous pulls away from its attachments at the very back of the inside of the eye (*posterior vitreous detachment*).

DIAGNOSIS

During an eye exam, an ophthalmologist can tell if you have any problems on the inside of your eye related to flashing lights. An exam by a retinal specialist may be needed.

TREATMENT

- If the photopsia does not point to active retinal diseases after an exam, you will not need treatment. The photopsia will often go away in a few weeks or months. However, you should be checked every few months to be sure that no problems inside the eye have developed since the symptoms started.
- If retinal tears, holes or a retinal detachment is found, treatment will be needed with surgery, freezing treatments (*cryo treatment*) or laser treatment depending on the nature of the condition.

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You see flashing lights in front of both eyes. This is especially true if you also see floating black spots or cobwebs in front of your vision.
- You see flashing lights and notice a drop in vision or a dark area (like a curtain) that you cannot see through in any area of your side vision.

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