Visual Floaters
Sung Choe, M.D.

Peter Hendler, M.D.: Hello, and welcome to KP Healthcast. This is Dr. Peter Hendler and today our guest is Dr. Sung Choe. Dr. Choe is board-certified in Ophthalmology and he did his training at Temple University in Philadelphia. He joined Kaiser in 2001 and he currently practices out of our Union City Medical Center. Today, we will be discussing visual floaters. Welcome Dr. Choe.

Sung Choe, M.D.: Thank you Dr. Hendler.

Peter Hendler, M.D.: What are visual floaters?

Sung Choe, M.D.: That’s when things float across your field of vision.

Peter Hendler, M.D.: Okay, what causes visual floaters?

Sung Choe, M.D.: The most common cause of floaters and flashes is something called a posterior vitreous detachment. The vitreous is a gel inside the eye that helps give the eye form and shape. In a child, this vitreous gel has a thick consistency and is firmly attached to the retina. However, as you age, this vitreous gel becomes thinner, and it then pulls away from the retina. When this occurs, it is not unusual to have visual changes which can include floaters, flashes, and even cobwebs among other things.

Peter Hendler, M.D.: Can floaters and flashes be dangerous?

Sung Choe, M.D.: Usually, floaters and flashes are harmless and the symptoms simply resolve on their own. However, there are instances when the vitreous gel pulls on the retina which can cause a retinal tear which can lead to retinal detachment.

Peter Hendler, M.D.: Should you seek medical attention if you have floaters and flashes?

Sung Choe, M.D.: Many of us will have the occasional floater and you don’t necessarily have to be seen by an ophthalmologist every time you see a spot floating in your vision. However, if the floaters and flashes are new or if you have a significant visual change, then I would recommend an evaluation by an ophthalmologist for a dilated retinal exam.

Peter Hendler, M.D.: Does a posterior vitreous detachment require treatment?

Sung Choe, M.D.: A posterior vitreous detachment in itself does not require any treatment. However, if there is a retinal tear, that will generally be treated with laser.

Peter Hendler, M.D.: What else can cause floaters and flashes?
Sung Choe, M.D.: Other less common causes of floaters and flashes include migraine headaches, inflammatory and infectious disorders of the retina and vitreous hemorrhage. In migraines, the visual changes are related to vasospasm which can lead to decreased blood flow. Inflammatory and infectious disorders of the retina can be associated with white blood cells inside the eye which can cause visual changes. Red blood cells inside the eye will also cause visual changes as will happen with a vitreous hemorrhage which can be secondary to diabetes.

Peter Hendler, M.D.: Do these other causes of flashes and floaters require treatment?

Sung Choe, M.D.: Migraine symptoms can often be lessened by avoiding the agents that trigger the migraines. In some patients, certain types of medications, foods, stress, or alcohol can precipitate the migraines and avoiding them will decrease the frequency of visual symptoms. In other people, the primary care physician will provide medications to treat the migraines. Inflammatory and infectious disorders of the retina can often be improved with antiinflammatory and antibiotic medications respectively. Vitreous hemorrhage, which is when there is bleeding inside the eye, is most commonly seen in diabetes and is usually treated with laser.

Peter Hendler, M.D.: Thank you Dr. Choe. I’d like to thank our listeners for spending their time with us today. Remember, you can also find our shows at www.KPHealthcast.org and can email us at Castmaster@kphealthcast.org. Thank you, and as always, be on the lookout for new ways to thrive.