

# What's floating in your eyesight?

By Roger P. Harrie, MD

**M**any people have tiny translucent dots, lines, or specks that have floated back and forth in their field of vision for years. Related to the embryonic development of the eye, these floaters were described by the ancient Romans as “muscae volitantes” (moving flies). They are usually fairly stable over the years, but a gradual increase with age is not uncommon, especially in nearsighted individuals.

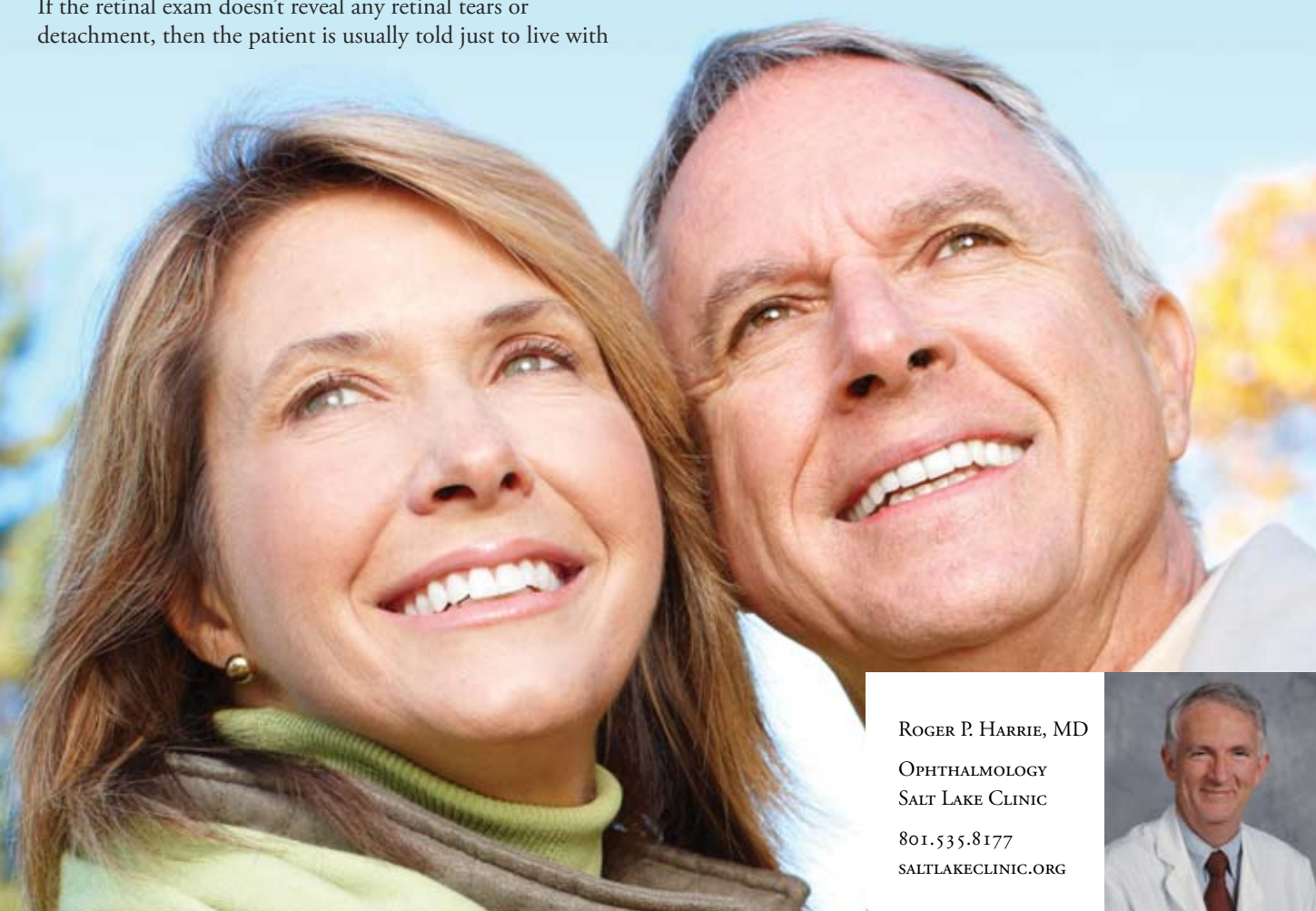
A clear jelly that fills the eye, called the vitreous, tends to liquefy and shrink with the aging process. When this happens, the number of floaters increases to the point of being rather annoying; they float into the center of the visual field and interfere with what is being seen. Sometimes a sudden increase in floaters can be a warning sign of a tear in the retina, which can progress to a full retinal detachment. Such an increase in the number of floaters is a reason to have a dilated retinal examination by an ophthalmologist because small, localized retinal tears can be easily treated by laser beam on an outpatient basis.

If the retinal exam doesn't reveal any retinal tears or detachment, then the patient is usually told just to live with

the floaters. They do tend to diminish over time, and after a few months most patients aren't really aware of them unless they concentrate on them. In some cases a weak dilation drop can be used daily to decrease the symptoms caused by the floaters, but most people simply ignore their floaters after being reassured that they are of no threat to their vision.

For those who are still very bothered by their floaters, technology has developed to the point that the vitreous can be removed by an operation called a vitrectomy that can eliminate the floaters. However, it is major eye surgery, and the associated potential complications such as cataract formation (almost always), infection, and retinal detachment preclude it for garden-variety floaters. This surgery is generally restricted to patients with severe problems of the vitreous such as hemorrhage or scar tissue.

To make an appointment with an ophthalmologist near you, we invite you to visit the index at the back of this publication or [intermountainmedicalgroup.org](http://intermountainmedicalgroup.org).



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