

# Cluster flies in the home

P.J. Pellitteri

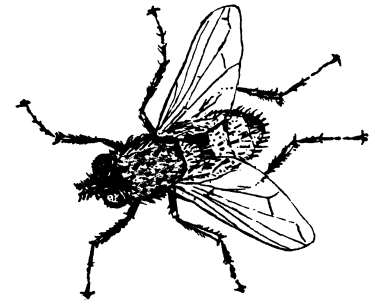
Cluster flies are black, sluggish, bumbling flies that invade homes, office buildings, hospitals, and other shelters every fall in search of a place to overwinter. They enter through cracks and holes in buildings and collect in attics and wall voids. When their resting place warms up, cluster flies resume activity and can be seen crawling on walls or flying around windows or other light sources. Active flies often die within 1–2 days, but if large numbers of flies have invaded a building they will be a major nuisance from fall through early spring.

Buildings in rural or open sites have the largest cluster fly problem. Older buildings with numerous cracks and openings can be overrun with flies. New energy-efficient construction can also be susceptible if overhangs or vents are not sealed properly. Even after adult flies leave in the spring, the dead cluster flies in attics and walls provide a

rich food source for other insects such as carpet and larder beetles. This creates additional nuisance problems during the summer that can only be solved by controlling the cluster fly problem.

## What they look like

Cluster flies are parasitic on some species of earthworms. Also called attic or window flies, cluster flies (*Pollenia rudis*) are slightly larger than house flies but lack the parallel stripes on the thorax. Under magnification fine golden hairs can be seen under the base of a cluster fly's wing. During the summer females lay eggs on the soil surface. Maggots hatch and burrow into the soil in search of a worm host. It takes about a month to complete development and there are three to four generations per year. Unlike many other indoor fly problems, cluster flies cannot breed in walls and there are no health concerns with cluster flies.



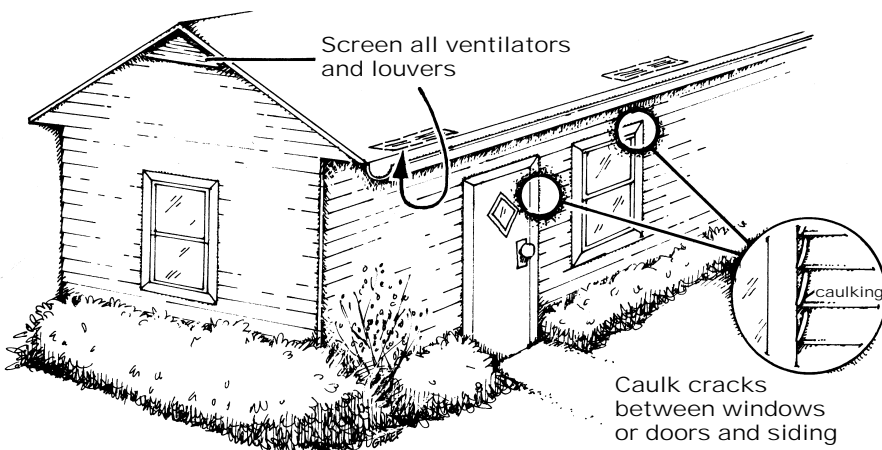
## Prevention

The best solution is to prevent flies from entering a building in the first place. You'll need to take steps before mid-September when they start looking for a place to hide. Adult cluster flies congregate on the sunny sides of a building and crawl upward as the day warms during late summer and early fall. If it finds an opening, the fly will crawl inside.

To make the building fly-proof, seal or caulk all cracks in siding, along eaves and overhangs, around door and window frames, siding, and especially soffits. Also check roof vents, ventilators, and vent fans for screening that is small enough to exclude the flies. If the flies are a problem in only one area, it usually signals which side of the building the flies entered. Screening, sealing, and caulking will also help to keep out the multi-colored Asian lady beetle, a 19-spotted orange beetle that also migrates indoors in the fall.

## Control

If cluster flies are indoors, you can use a vacuum to collect them. Cluster flies move from walls and attic into the living space through openings in ceiling fixtures and around window casings and electrical outlets. Sealing or taping these openings can reduce the nuisance problem. Another solution is to place fly light traps in the dark voids of false ceilings to help reduce fly numbers. Insect bombs are of little long-term help as they kill only the flies that are exposed but not the flies hidden in walls or attics.





When a building cannot be sealed properly, residual sprays can be used. Spraying has several drawbacks: it must be reapplied each year, proper timing is critical, and cost. Sprays must be applied to the outside walls of the structure during the late summer or early fall (by September 15), before the flies get into the walls. The south and west sides of buildings usually have the largest number of flies resting on the outside. Be sure to treat all areas of walls on overhangs.

Most materials available to the homeowner do not work well during cool fall temperatures, and the sprays that do work are not easily obtained or applied. Fly sprays containing synthetic pyrethroids such as permethrin, bifenthrin, cyfluthrin (Tempo), and cypermethrin perform well at the lower fall temperatures and are preferred. Professional pest control companies have a number of other registered pyrethroids which must be applied during September for best control.

Lawn treatments to kill earthworms are ineffective in solving the problem because flies migrate in from great distances. Dry years that reduce earthworm populations reduce cluster fly problems.

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