

## Those Pesky Little Black Flies

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**B**lack-winged Fungus Gnat is the common name of these pesky “little black flies.” A gnat, being a true fly, has only one pair of wings.

Majority of people want to know how to control these gnats. Some wonder if the gnats are harmful if accidentally swallowed. Others question whether gnats can cause allergic skin reactions or even ocular infections if they get into the eyes. There are many other homeowners that have similar questions.

Let’s take the easy question first. No, they are not harmful if swallowed or digested with some food. Most people have no idea the percent of insects they eat on a daily bases, within the fresh and processed food consumed. There are some cultures where insects make up a very large percent of the diet.

Can they cause allergic skin reactions? An estimated 99.9% of those who come in contact with these gnats (either in hair or on skin) will not have any allergic skin reactions. However, there may be some individuals who in fact are more sensitive to insects and show some skin allergies if these gnats are crushed into the skin as they are being slapped.



Compared to our thick skin, the human eye is a very sensitive organ. Any small insect, including these fungus gnats, could easily cause eye irritation and perhaps an ocular infection if the gnat is not immediately washed out of the eye. Anyone having difficulty seeing due to these insects getting into their eyes should see a doctor as soon as possible.

Now the most difficult question, how to control them? First, one must understand that all flies go through four stages of

development: egg, larva (often called maggots), pupa, and adult. Adult fungus gnats are about one-eighth to one-tenth inch (2.5 mm) long, black, slender, mosquito-like, and delicate with long legs, antennae, and one pair of wings. Larvae or maggots are legless, thread-like, white, shiny white, and semi-transparent.

With the small black fungus gnats, population levels are directly correlated to the increase of fungal decomposition. Rain with corresponding high humidity will increase the growth of fungi (mold) and increase the food potential for the developing larva. As adults, gnats have the ability to fly and seek out more breeding sites for their offspring. Fungus gnats are highly attracted to lights and due to their very small size, they can easily go underneath doors and through most window screens as they enter our homes.

Because of their small size, it is difficult to totally secure one's house. A very mild dilution of bleach (two tablespoons of bleach per quart of water) mixed and sprayed from a spray bottle, will kill off any flying gnat or even those gnats at rest on counter tops or resting on glass windows. It is also suggested to use the bleach spray in any open floor drains which are inside the home. Care needs to be taken not to damage fabric with this mixture. Make sure window screens and especially doors that lead to the outside of the house are well sealed.

For outside the house, it is suggested to try a couple of control measures. The first one is a non-chemical approach. Set out a jar (or jars) of wine or cider vinegar outside the house in a covered area. The gnats will be attracted to the smell, dive in for a drink and drown. The wine or cider will need to be replenished at least once a week. Most garden insecticides can also be sprayed around the perimeter of the house to help reduce the

young larvae that may be developing in organic material around the house. The difficulty is that many of these adult fungus gnats live outside the perimeter of one's home and are attracted to outside house lights and take shelter underneath carports during periodic rains. Since the developing larvae are fungus feeders, the more organic material (decaying plants and grass) that surrounds a house, the greater number of flies could be raising. One hundred percent control is just not possible.

Fungus gnats are going to be around until the raining season is over. The dry season will reduce their breeding sites and their numbers will be greatly reduced. But one can be assured they will be back again next year when the rains return. Some say it is the price we pay when living in the tropics.

For more information about household pests, please contact your local Cooperative Extension Service.

*This factsheet was part of a series on household insects written for the Pacific Daily News from September 1997 - November 1999. Content has been verified as of January 2017.*