

Psittacosis

Frequently Asked Questions

What is psittacosis?

Psittacosis (SIT-a-KOH-sis) is an illness caused by the *Chlamydophila psittaci* (formerly known as *Chlamydia psittaci*) bacteria. Infected birds transmit this disease to humans. The infection in humans is also called parrot fever or ornithosis and causes influenza-like illness that can lead to severe pneumonia. This disease is most common in psittacine (parrot-type) birds, especially cockatiels and parakeets.

Who gets psittacosis?

Fewer than 50 cases of psittacosis are reported in the United States every year, and human illness is rare. Contact with caged birds, as opposed to wild birds or poultry, accounts for over 70% of human cases. People at risk for getting psittacosis include pigeon fanciers and people in specific occupations (e.g., employees in poultry slaughtering and processing plants, pet shop employees, veterinarians, veterinary technicians, laboratory workers, wildlife rehabilitators and zoo workers).

How do people get psittacosis?

Human infection usually occurs through inhaling (breathing) the bacteria in dried bird droppings and feather dust. Other potential sources of exposure include bird bites, mouth-to-beak contact and handling feathers and tissues from infected birds. Even brief exposures can lead to infections and people with psittacosis may not recall or report having any contact with birds.

What are the symptoms of psittacosis?

The severity of the illness can range from mild to a severe illness with pneumonia. The onset of illness typically occurs 5 to 14 days after exposure to an infected bird but longer periods of up to four weeks have been reported.

The symptoms of psittacosis include:

- Fever
- Headache
- Chills
- Weakness
- Nausea
- Muscle aches
- Dry cough

Endocarditis (inflammation of the lining of the heart), inflammation of the liver and neurologic complications may occur. With appropriate treatment, the disease is rarely fatal. Elderly and people with weak immune systems are most susceptible to infection.

How is psittacosis diagnosed?

Psittacosis is usually diagnosed by clinical symptoms and a history of exposure to birds. If a health care provider suspects psittacosis, samples of the patient's blood will be examined.

What is the treatment for psittacosis?

Antibiotics are effective in treating psittacosis in humans. With appropriate treatment, the vast majority of people fully recover. (NOTE: It is very important to finish your antibiotics even if you begin to feel better, unless otherwise directed by your health care provider.)

What is the treatment for birds?

Infected birds should be isolated and treated for 30 to 45 days, based on the type of bird infected. Treatment should be administered under the supervision of a veterinarian and consist of medicated feed, but antibiotics can also be used. Antibiotics placed in the water will not eliminate the disease in birds. To prevent re-infection, birdcages and rooms where infected birds were housed should be cleaned and sanitized.

Can people with psittacosis pass the illness to others?

Psittacosis is rarely spread from person to person. No special precautions are necessary for people who are ill with psittacosis.

How can psittacosis be prevented?

- Prevent overcrowding and maintain good sanitation and ventilation where birds are kept.
- Do not purchase ill birds or those which were kept in dirty or crowded conditions.
- Before adding a new bird into a group, have it examined by a veterinarian. Keep the bird isolated until your veterinarian recommends that it join the group.
- In some cases it is recommended to treat birds coming into homes with antibiotics. Check with your veterinarian.

Where can I get more information on psittacosis?

- Your health care provider and/or veterinarian
- Your local health department
- NJ Department of Health www.nj.gov/health
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention www.cdc.gov

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional. Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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