

PSITTACOSIS

What is Psittacosis?



Chlamydia psittaci is a type of bacteria that often infects birds. Less commonly, these bacteria can infect people and cause a disease called psittacosis. Psittacosis in people is most commonly associated with pet birds, whether obviously sick or apparently healthy. Outbreaks occasionally occur in households, pet shops, aviaries, avian exhibits and pigeon lofts. Most human cases are sporadic; many infections are not diagnosed.

How is it Spread?

The bacteria can infect people exposed to infected birds. It is important to know that infected birds do not always have symptoms or seem sick. Both sick birds and birds without symptoms shed the bacteria in their droppings and respiratory secretions. When the droppings and secretions dry, small dust particles (including the bacteria) can get into the air. The most common way someone gets infected is by breathing in the dust from these dried secretions. Less commonly, birds infect people through bites and beak-to-mouth contact.

In general, people do not spread psittacosis to other people. However, this is possible in rare cases.

Some people refer to psittacosis as parrot disease or parrot fever, but the bacteria can infect many types of birds.

Signs and Symptoms

In People

In general, psittacosis causes mild illness. The most common symptoms include:

- Fever and chills
- Headache
- Muscle aches
- Dry cough

Psittacosis can also cause pneumonia (a lung infection) that may require treatment or care in a hospital. Rarely, psittacosis can result in death.

Most people begin developing signs and symptoms within 1-4 weeks (sometimes as early as 5 days) after exposure to the bacteria (*Chlamydia psittaci*). Less commonly, people report symptoms starting after 14 days.

In Birds

The signs of *C. psittaci* infection in birds are non-specific and include:

- Poor appetite
- Inflamed eyes
- Breathing difficulty
- Diarrhea

Infected birds may not have symptoms or seem sick. When birds have symptoms caused by *C. psittaci* infection, veterinarians call the disease avian chlamydiosis.

Diagnosis

Symptoms of psittacosis are similar to many other respiratory illnesses. In addition, tests to detect the bacteria directly may not be readily available. For these reasons, healthcare professionals may not be suspect it, making psittacosis difficult to diagnose.

There are a number of tests healthcare professionals can use to determine if someone has psittacosis. These tests include collecting sputum (phlegm) or swabs from the nose and/or throat to detect the bacteria.

Treatment

People diagnosed with psittacosis usually take antibiotics to treat the infection. Most people improve quickly if they start antibiotics right away. It is important to take antibiotics exactly as prescribed.

Complications

Most people who get treatment for psittacosis make a full recovery. However, some people have serious complications and need care or treatment in a hospital. Complications include:

- Lung inflammation (pneumonia)
- Inflammation of the heart valves (endocarditis)
- Inflammation of the liver (hepatitis)
- Inflammation of the nerves or the brain, leading to neurologic problems

With appropriate antibiotic treatment, psittacosis rarely (less than 1 in 100 cases) results in death.

Prevention

There is no vaccine to prevent psittacosis. There are things that can be done to protect a person from psittacosis such as buying pet birds from well-known pet stores and following good precautions when handling and cleaning birds and cages. If a person gets psittacosis, they may get sick from it again in the future.

Safe Bird and Cage Care

One important aspect of preventing psittacosis is to control infection among birds.

- Keep cages clean; clean cages and food water bowls daily.
- Position cages so that food, feathers, and feces cannot spread between cages. Use solid sided cases or barriers if cages are next to one another.
- Avoid over-crowding.
- Isolate and treat infected birds.
- Use water or disinfectant to wet surfaces before cleaning cages or surfaces contaminated with bird droppings. Avoid dry sweeping or vacuuming to minimize circulation of feathers and dust.
- Thoroughly wash hands with running water and soap after contact with birds or droppings.
- Use personal protective equipment (PPE), such as gloves and appropriate masks, when handling infected birds or cleaning their cages.



For more sources of information on this topic visit:

ST. CLAIR COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT www.scchealth.co

MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES www.michigan.gov/mdhhs

CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION www.cdc.gov