

What is psittacosis?

Psittacosis is a disease caused by the bacteria *Chlamydia psittaci*, which can cause illness in both birds and humans. Psittacosis is most commonly identified in birds in the parrot family (psittacine birds), such as parakeets, cockatiels, parrots, and macaws, but can also occur in poultry, pigeons, and waterfowl. Birds infected with *Chlamydia psittaci* may exhibit tiredness, loss of appetite, ruffled feathers, weight loss, difficulty breathing, greenish-colored droppings, or discharge from the eyes and nose. Psittacosis in humans is typically characterized by general respiratory symptoms.

How is psittacosis spread?

People get psittacosis primarily by breathing in contaminated dust from bird droppings or feathers, and by close contact with sick birds that are shedding the organism. Birds tend to shed the organism under conditions of stress such as shipping and crowding. For this reason, the disease is most often seen in birds that have been recently imported, housed in pet shops, or boarded with other birds. Birds do not have to show symptoms of disease in order to spread the infection to other birds or their handlers. Human-to-human spread is extremely rare. Waste material in the bird cage may remain infectious for weeks and birds may shed the bacteria for weeks or months.

Who gets psittacosis?

Anyone can get psittacosis if he or she has exposure to infected birds or the environment where the infected birds have been. Since this disease is spread by birds in the parrot family, it is occasionally found in pet store workers and people who have purchased an infected bird. It may also be found in farmers and slaughterhouse workers who process turkeys or ducks.

What are the symptoms of psittacosis in people?

In humans, the disease ranges from showing no symptoms to systemic illness with severe pneumonia. The illness typically starts with an onset of fever, chills, headache, malaise, and muscle aches. A mild cough and sore throat often develop following these symptoms. Although *C. psittaci* infection in humans is normally mild, it can be more severe for persons who are currently sick, elderly, or have a condition that suppresses their immune system.

What are the symptoms of psittacosis in birds?

In birds, the symptoms include poor appetite, ruffled appearance, eye or nose discharge, and diarrhea. Occasionally, birds may die from psittacosis. Some birds may shed the organism while exhibiting no symptoms.

How soon do symptoms appear?

The symptoms generally appear about ten days after exposure, but can appear as early as one week or as long as four weeks after exposure.

What is the treatment for psittacosis?

Appropriate antibiotics are usually very effective. Oral tetracycline or doxycycline is generally prescribed for adults, and erythromycin for children under the age of nine and pregnant women.

Can a person get psittacosis more than once?

Yes. One bout with psittacosis does not protect a person from getting it again.

How can psittacosis be prevented?

1. Take all new birds to a qualified avian veterinarian immediately after purchase for psittacosis screening tests.
2. Buy birds from reputable suppliers who screen for the presence of psittacosis.
3. Isolate and quarantine all newly acquired birds for a period of at least six weeks.
4. Practice preventive husbandry (care and management of animals). Keep cages and area clean. A cleaning solution prepared by adding two and one half tablespoons of household bleach to one gallon of water will kill the bacteria. Allow all cage surfaces, including perches and bowls, to thoroughly dry before returning bird to the clean cage.

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