

PSITTACOSIS

Introduction

Psittacosis is an infection of parrots and other types of birds, caused by a micro-organism known as *Chlamydia psittaci*.

In humans, psittacosis can present itself as anything from a mild 'flu-like' illness, which can be treated easily with a short course of antibiotics, to a severe generalised infection, which in extremely rare cases can be fatal.

Infection in Birds

Chlamydia psittaci infects wild and domestic birds and poultry. Birds that can contract the infection include parrots, canaries, pigeons, chickens, ducks and turkeys.

Birds can be carriers of the infection. This means they appear healthy and do not show any symptoms initially, but some then show signs in the future, for example if stressed. Examples of stress triggers include nutritional deficiencies, overcrowding, breeding, egg-laying and prolonged transport. Infected birds carrying *Chlamydia psittaci* bacteria may shed the bacteria in their droppings and through nasal discharges. This can be intermittent or continuously for weeks or months. When this happens, the infected birds can remain infective for several months.

Source of Infection in Birds

The organism is shed in the nasal secretions and in the droppings from infected birds, recovering birds and carriers. This is especially significant in crowded conditions, as well as in nest boxes. Once outside the body, the organism can live for a long period of time, drying in dust that infects the susceptible hosts as they breathe. People can be infected by inhaling this contaminated dust or ingesting (eating) the bacteria, and as a general rule, Chlamydia that you breathe in causes severe disease, while eaten Chlamydia tends to produce fever symptoms.

Diagnosis

The time between exposure to *Chlamydia psittaci* and the onset of illness in caged birds ranges from three days to several weeks. Sick birds show signs of:

- Sleepiness
- Shivering
- Weight loss
- Breathing difficulties
- Diarrhoea
- Ruffled feathers

Diagnosis of *Chlamydia psittaci* in birds is only completely certain if the bacteria are identified, isolated or cause a predictable set of symptoms. The identification of the organism is made by laboratory tests.

Treatment and Prevention in Birds

Most vets treat infected birds with antibiotics. The antibiotic can be given into the vein or injected into a bird's muscle. The antibiotics can also be given as a liquid or mixed with the bird's food.

Pets that are severely ill with the disease need intense care, such as heat, isolation, extremely clean conditions, absence from stress. They will also need therapy for any other problems they may have at the same time.

Psittacosis and Humans

Humans can become infected with *Chlamydia psittaci* by breathing in the organism when the nasal secretions or dried droppings of infected birds are dispersed in the air as dust. Other sources of exposure include mouth-to-beak contact, a bite from an infected bird, and handling the plumage and tissues of infected birds.

The infection in humans varies in severity from a mild 'flu-like illness to severe pneumonia. Generally the signs and symptoms appear within four to 15 days after exposure. These include:

- Fever
- Chills
- Cough
- Weakness or fatigue
- Muscles and chest pain
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Diarrhoea
- Headache
- Sweating
- Abnormal intolerance to light

Psittacosis is primarily a lung disease but it can involve several organs. Some reports show that inflammation of the liver, lining of the heart cavity, the heart muscle and the brain can occur.

The course of the disease is variable and while usually mild, it can be fatal in extremely rare cases. Even in mild cases the fever may continue for three weeks or more.

Diagnosis, Treatment and Prevention in Humans

For accurate diagnosis of psittacosis, you must tell your doctor that you have been in contact with birds, no matter how insignificant you think this might be. Laboratory examinations can identify the organism and detect the causes of the infection. Patients who develop psittacosis require treatment with specific drugs.

Conclusion

Psittacosis refers to any infection or disease caused by *Chlamydia psittaci*. It is sometimes also called 'Bird Fancier's Lung', parrot disease, ornithosis, and chlamydiosis. It is an infectious disease in humans that usually has mild, non-specific 'flu-like symptoms. This disease can be transmitted from infected birds to humans.

Pets are Good for People

Pets provide us with loyalty, companionship, love and affection, as well as the many physical and psychological benefits. The least we can do to repay this is to ensure that we keep them in the best of health. A healthy pet is a happy pet and a happy pet can help us enjoy a much fuller and more rewarding life.

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For further information, please contact the Pet Health Council on:

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