

Psittacosis - parrot fever

Psittacosis is a type of lung infection caused by the bacterium *Chlamydia psittaci*. This germ is principally carried by birds of the parrot family including budgerigars, lovebirds and parakeets. The disease is sometimes called 'parrot fever'. Other birds that may harbour the germ include canaries, poultry and pigeons. Both wild and domesticated varieties can carry the bacteria, and some infected birds don't show any sign of illness.

Humans most commonly catch the disease from infected birds by inhaling the bacteria from shed feathers, secretions and droppings. Human to human transmission is extremely rare. Psittacosis can be mild, moderate or severe; some people may have no symptoms. Older people generally experience more severe reactions. The complications of untreated psittacosis include inflammation of the brain or heart. This disease can be readily treated with antibiotics.

Symptoms

The incubation period for psittacosis is between one week and one month from exposure. Symptoms may include:

- Fever
- Headache
- General malaise
- Muscle aches
- A dry cough
- Shortness of breath.

People at risk

People who have birds as pets, poultry workers and anyone working in aviaries or pet shops are most at risk of catching psittacosis. However, even casual contact with an infected bird can result in infection. There have been reports of some people developing psittacosis despite having no recognised contact at all with birds.

Treatment

Psittacosis is diagnosed with blood tests and chest x-rays. Treatment options include antibiotics. The symptoms usually ease within one day, but the full course of tablets needs to be taken.

Preventive measures

Once psittacosis has been diagnosed, it is important to treat the birds and their environment. Remember that healthy birds may be harbouring the bacteria as well. Treatment suggestions include:

- Avoid unnecessary handling of sick birds.
- Avoid breathing in any dust from dried bird droppings, feathers or cage dust.
- Isolate sick birds from the rest of the flock.
- Treat infected birds with appropriate antibiotics for at least one month.
- Clean cages with appropriate disinfectants, since the bacteria can live for several months in shed feathers and droppings.
- Wear masks and gloves while cleaning the cages to prevent infection.
- Clean the cages regularly, using plenty of water to minimise the risk of floating dander.
- Always wash hands thoroughly after tending to birds.

Infection doesn't confer immunity

Catching psittacosis doesn't confer immunity, which means a person regularly exposed to infected birds can become sick again. There is no vaccine against the disease.

Chlamydiae bacteria are unique

Chlamydiae are a family of bacteria that cause diseases in humans, including psittacosis, sexually transmitted diseases, pneumonia (non-avian) and trachoma (which can lead to blindness). Chlamydiae differ from other kinds of bacteria in two important respects: they are considerably smaller and they behave more like viruses than bacteria. Chlamydiae can't exist outside a host cell. Once they have gained access to a suitable host cell, the bacteria 'reprogram' the cell's DNA to produce more Chlamydiae, which is how viruses multiply.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Veterinarian
- Department of Human Services, Public Health Division (Communicable Diseases) Tel. 1300 651 160

Things to remember

- Psittacosis is a type of lung infection caused by the bacterium *Chlamydia psittaci*.
- *Chlamydia psittaci* is commonly carried by birds of the parrot family including budgerigars, lovebirds and parakeets.
- This disease can be readily treated with antibiotics.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Department of Health - Communicable Disease Prevention and Control Unit

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