

What is Psittacosis?

Psittacosis (also known as ornithosis and parrot fever) is an uncommon human disease caused by the bacteria called *Chlamydophila psittaci*. It is usually transmitted to humans from birds, normally those in the parrot family (parrots, lorikeets, galahs, cockatoos, budgerigars etc). However, the bacteria may also be found in other species of bird including pigeons and canaries.

How is it spread?

Infection usually occurs when a person inhales the bacteria from dried bird droppings, secretions or dust from feathers of infected birds. The bacteria may survive in bird dust for several months. Infected birds may have no obvious symptoms or may become ill.

Human to human transmission is rare, but has occurred.

What are the symptoms?

Psittacosis tends to produce a non-specific illness. Symptoms can be mild or moderate and may include fever, headache, rash, muscle aches, chills and non-productive cough. Occasionally more serious complications affecting the heart, liver, lungs or brain may occur.

The time from contact with the bacteria and the development of symptoms is usually about one to four weeks.

Who is at risk?

People most at risk are those who come into contact with birds. Anyone can get psittacosis, however older adults and pregnant women may be more susceptible to severe illness if infected.

How is it diagnosed?

Your doctor can diagnose psittacosis by assessing the symptoms, the results of an examination, and test results. Tests may include a chest x-ray and blood tests.

How is it treated?

Psittacosis is usually treated with antibiotics.

Environmental Control

In addition to treating infected people, the spread of disease can be controlled by treating infected birds with antibiotics and ensuring that the environment in which they live is thoroughly cleaned. Protective clothing (including masks and gloves) should be worn when cleaning the cages of potentially infected birds.

Preventative measures

The spread of disease should be controlled by treating infected birds and ensuring the environment they live in is cleaned. It can be difficult to tell if a bird is infected, if you are concerned, a veterinarian should examine your bird. In order to prevent illness the following measures are recommended.

- Wash your hands with soap and running water before and after handling pet birds.
- Avoid kissing (mouth-to beak contact with) pet birds.
- Birds should be housed in clean cages of ample size that are lined with newspaper that is changed frequently. Do not allow faecal material to accumulate, dry up or become airborne.
- Before cleaning the cage, wear a P2 mask and gloves and dampen any bird droppings or cages, and wash your hands after completion.
- When dealing with infected birds, gloves, a mask and protective clothing should be worn.

Need more information?

For more information about psittacosis, contact your doctor or call the Health Protection Service, Communicable Disease Control Information Line during business hours on **(02) 6205 2155**.

Communicable Disease Control Section at Health Protection Service is responsible for the investigation and surveillance of notifiable or infectious conditions in the ACT in order to control or prevent their spread in the community. This includes the promotion of immunisation, education and other strategies that help to limit the spread of diseases.

Psittacosis is a notifiable disease. Cases notified to ACT Health are investigated by Public Health Officers.

Acknowledgements

1. Heymann, D L, 2015, *Control of Communicable Diseases Manual*, 20th edition.
2. Stewardson AJ and Grayson ML, Psittacosis. *Infect Dis Clinics of North America* 2010; 24: 7-25.

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