

Psittacosis FAQs for Bird Owners and Caretakers

What causes psittacosis?

Psittacosis (also known as parrot fever or ornithosis) is an infectious disease caused by the bacterium *Chlamydophila psittaci*. All birds are susceptible to *C. psittaci* infections; however, pet birds (parrots, parakeets, macaws, and cockatiels), poultry species (turkeys and ducks), and captive pigeons or doves are the most frequent species involved in transmission. Disease in birds is most often called avian chlamydiosis.

What are the signs of avian chlamydiosis in infected birds? Studies have shown that some birds may shed *C. psittaci* in their droppings without obvious signs of illness. Among sick birds, the signs of avian chlamydiosis are non-specific and include lethargy, decreased appetite, and ruffled feathers. Other signs include ocular or nasal discharge, diarrhea, and excretion of green to yellow-green droppings. Severely affected birds may stop eating altogether and produce sparse, dark green droppings, and become thin, dehydrated, and die.

How do birds get infected with *C. psittaci*?

C. psittaci can remain infectious in the environment for several months if covered by organic matter (litter, feces). The typical incubation period for birds ranges from 3 days to several weeks. Rarely, birds may appear relatively healthy and shed the bacteria in their droppings. Birds spread the disease between each other through ingestion of contaminated materials (for example, if healthy birds have access to infected droppings in the cage or contaminated food and water dishes). Transmission can also occur via close contact with one another (e.g. sharing a cage). Lastly, birds can inhale aerosolized bacteria from dried, contaminated excretions.

Can my bird be cured of avian chlamydiosis?

Avian chlamydiosis can be fatal to birds if left untreated. However, birds diagnosed with infection can often be cured with appropriate antibiotic therapy, most commonly given for a period of 45 days. Antibiotics can be given through medicated feed or water, syrup, or injections. Although treatment is usually

successful, a complete cure depends upon many factors and no protocol ensures a safe and complete elimination of infection in every bird. Consequently, treatment of avian chlamydiosis should be supervised by a veterinarian.

How can I prevent avian chlamydiosis?

Avoid purchasing birds that have signs consistent with illness, such as ocular or nasal discharge, diarrhea, or low body weight. Newly-acquired birds or birds potentially exposed to infected birds should be isolated from healthy birds for at least 30 days and watched closely for signs of disease. Position bird cages to prevent the movement of fecal matter, feathers, food, and other materials from one cage to another. Do not stack cages and use solid-sided cages or barriers if cages are adjoining. Cage bottoms should be made of wire mesh with litter that will not produce dust underneath. While birds are being isolated, cages, water bowls, and food bowls should be cleaned daily. Soiled bowls should be emptied, cleaned with soap and water, rinsed, placed in disinfectant solution, and rinsed again before use. Cages should be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected between birds.

If my bird has avian chlamydiosis can I get sick too?

Yes, although rare, *C. psittaci* bacteria can also infect humans. This infection is commonly called psittacosis and results in a respiratory disease that is treatable by your doctor with antibiotics.

How does *C. psittaci* spread to humans from birds?

Spread often occurs through inhalation of aerosolized bacteria shed in bird feces or respiratory secretions. People can become infected when contaminated, dried feces accumulate and become airborne during cage cleaning or air movement in the cage. The organism can also spread between birds and humans through mouth-to-beak contact or from handling contaminated plumage or tissues from infected birds.

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What are the symptoms of psittacosis in humans?

Human psittacosis symptoms can range from inapparent to severe pneumonia and death. In those who show symptoms, infection is characterized by flu-like symptoms such as fever, chills, headache, malaise, and muscle aches. Sick individuals often develop an unproductive cough and complain of breathing difficulties and chest tightness.

If I were infected, how long after exposure would I become ill?

On average, symptoms will begin within 5 to 14 days following exposure to *C. psittaci*, but longer periods have been reported.

What is the treatment for psittacosis in humans?

Antibiotics are used to treat psittacosis in humans. Persons infected with *C. psittaci* typically respond well to therapy. Tetracyclines are most often given orally with continued treatment for several days after the fever resolves. Symptoms may go away after 2 to 3 days, but it is important to continue the medication to prevent a relapse of disease.

How do I prevent myself from getting psittacosis if my bird is infected?

Isolate sick birds from healthy birds and clean and disinfect the room housing sick birds thoroughly. Do not use a vacuum to remove dried bird droppings from cages or the floor. Do not overcrowd cages and frequently clean cages housing infected birds. When cleaning the cage, moisten the litter first to prevent aerosolization of contaminated litter, and double bag the litter for disposal. Use a wet mop on floors to keep dust and aerosolization to a minimum. Make sure anyone in contact with the infected bird or contaminated materials wears protective clothing when cleaning cages or handling sick birds. This includes: protective coveralls, smock or labcoat, disposable surgical cap, gloves, and a fit-tested respirator with N95 or higher rating. Surgical masks might not be sufficient in preventing the spread of psittacosis.

If my bird is infected, can my other pets also get psittacosis?

Although the *Chlamydophila* genera of bacteria affect a wide variety of species, *C. psittaci* primarily affects birds. Transmission from birds to other companion animals, such as dogs and cats, has been suspected, but is considered very rare.

How do I eradicate *C. psittaci* from the environment after my home or aviary has become contaminated?

C. psittaci is susceptible to most disinfectants and detergents as well as heat. Some effective disinfectants include dilute quaternary ammonium compounds (eg, Roccal or Zephiran), 1% Lysol, 70% isopropyl alcohol, or 1:32 dilution of bleach (i.e. ½ cup per gallon). All surfaces should be cleaned thoroughly before disinfection and most disinfectants require 5 to 10 minutes of contact time to kill the bacteria. Remember to use disinfectants according to label instructions in a well ventilated area. Wet mop the floor with disinfectants.

How do I find out if I have avian chlamydiosis in my aviary?

Keep records from each bird purchase, like date, species, number, source, and any identified illness or death among birds. Take birds that die to a veterinarian for a post-mortem examination and diagnostic testing. Watch birds closely for signs and symptoms of disease and take any ill birds to an avian veterinarian for diagnosis and treatment.

For more information about avian chlamydiosis and human psittacosis:

American Veterinary Medical Association

<http://www.avma.org/reference/zoonosis/znpsttacosis.asp>

U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/psittacosis_t.htm

<http://www.cdc.gov/epo/dphsi/casedef/psittacosiscurrent.htm>