**Psittacosis**

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**What is Psittacosis?**

Psittacosis is an uncommon disease that is usually transmitted to humans from birds. It is caused by bacteria called *Chlamydia psittaci*.

**What are the symptoms?**

The time from between human exposure to the bacteria and the development of symptoms varies from about four to 15 days.

People with psittacosis often develop:

- fever
- chills
- headache
- weakness
- muscle aches
- a dry cough
- chest pain
- breathless

In severe cases, pneumonia develops. Rare complications may include encephalitis (inflammation of the brain), or myocarditis (inflammation of the heart muscle).

**How is it spread?**

Infection usually occurs when a person inhales the bacteria, usually from dried bird droppings from infected birds. People can also become infected by mouth-to-beak contact (kissing) with birds or by handling the feathers or tissues of infected birds. Psittacosis has not been proven to be spread from person to person.

All birds are susceptible to infection, but pet birds (e.g. parrots, parakeets, cockatiels) and poultry (turkeys and ducks) are most frequently involved in passing the infection to humans.

Contact with wild birds and their droppings can cause infection. Outbreaks have been linked to breathing in dust stirred up by lawn mowers.
Who is at risk?
People most at risk of infection with psittacosis are those who come into contact with birds through their work or hobbies. For example: bird owners, pet shop employees, vets, or people who process poultry.

How is it prevented?
In birds, symptoms of the infection can vary from none to a fatal illness. Sick birds may have symptoms such as:

- Diarrhoea
- Weakness
- Ruffled feathers
- Not eating
- Runny eyes or nose

If in doubt, a vet should examine your bird. Infected birds need to be isolated, treated with antibiotics and have their cages disinfected.

It can be difficult to tell if a bird is infected, so to be safe:

- Wash your hands with soap and running water for 10 seconds 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, a paper cap and protective clothing should be worn
- Birds should only be obtained from a licensed pet store or aviary.

How is it diagnosed?
Your doctor can diagnose psittacosis by the symptoms, an examination and by doing some tests. Tests may include a chest x-ray, and taking some blood to test for the bacteria.

How is it treated?
Psittacosis is treated with antibiotics for a period of about two weeks.

What is the public health response?
Laboratories must confidentially notify cases of psittacosis to the local public health unit. Public health unit staff will talk to the treating doctor and patient or carer to identify where the infection may have come from. Other people who may have been exposed to an infected bird should be made aware of the symptoms of infection. The bird should be treated and its environment cleaned with disinfectant to prevent further infections being spread to other people or other birds.

For further information please call your local Public Health Unit on 1300 066 055 or visit the New South Wales Health website www.health.nsw.gov.au