

Allergic Alveolitis: A Hypersensitivity Disorder

by the World Parrot Trust

Allergy – *def. An abnormal reaction of the body to a previously encountered allergen introduced by inhalation, ingestion, injection or skin contact, often manifested by itchy eyes, runny nose, wheezing, skin rash, or diarrhoea.*

Alveolitis – *def. Inflammation of one or more alveoli especially of the lung*

Allergic alveolitis, while not strictly a zoonotic disease (because it is not really an infection), is still an issue for concern. It is also known by a number of other monikers - hypersensitivity pneumonitis, parakeet dander pneumoconiosis and pigeon lung disease. In people with pet or breeding birds this particular alveolitis is caused by contact with feather dander, dust and feces of birds. The disease itself can be cryptic: clinical signs can occur within two years but may take as many as 10-20 years of continuous exposure. Once the disease process is set into motion it may occur in acute, subacute or chronic forms. The acute form presents within 4-8 of exposure:

- Coughing
- Dyspnea (difficulty breathing)
- Chills
- High fever

This generally follows sudden contact to a *significant* level of feather dander and/or feces (for instance, a thorough, general cleaning). If exposure is stopped generally no treatment is necessary (providing the dyspnea resolves itself) and the signs will disappear.

The subacute form results from long term contact with bird-related debris. Signs include:

- Dry (unproductive) cough
- progressive breathing difficulty

Reversal of the subacute form of the disorder is possible, again, if exposure is stopped. If it continues a *chronic, non-reversible* type occurs in which progressively difficult breathing (dyspnea), dry cough and weight loss are the key signs. This is potentially serious, and can be mistaken for a bad cold or influenza virus. With chronic alveolitis permanent lung problems may develop – including a serious illness called *pulmonary fibrosis*, which reduces the lungs' ability to take in air properly.

The severe nature of this disease can be reduced by taking some fairly simple precautions: wearing face masks and other protective gear while cleaning cages, cleaning cages daily, bathing pet birds frequently (which they will enjoy), avoiding overcrowding of birds and cages in the aviary (which is better for the birds as well) and installing air filtration systems which contain multiple and hepa filters.

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By using these measures one can greatly reduce the risk of the problem starting in the first place, and increase the health and enjoyment of both people and pet birds. Often the simplest of concepts such as cleanliness and vigilance in spotting potential problems are enough to alleviate human-to-bird, bird-to-human issues.

This article is provided for information purposes only and should not replace a veterinarian's or doctor's diagnosis. The World Parrot Trust encourages people caring for parrots or family members who are unwell to seek help from a qualified professional.

Sources:

Avian Diseases Transmissible to Humans

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