

Colibacillosis – A Preventable Illness

By the World Parrot Trust

Colibacillosis is caused by *Escherichia coli* bacteria. These gram-negative, rod-shaped bacteria are normally found in the intestinal tracts of most mammals and some birds. *E. coli*, a member of the *Enterobacteriaceae* family, is not found normally in parrots, however. The normal intestinal flora of a parrot consists of *gram-positive*, not gram negative organisms.

There are a number of types, or strains, of *E. coli*, many specific to certain species of animals. Not all types are capable of causing disease, but some can be devastating. Although generally seen in mass poultry farming, infection is not unheard of in pet birds or other animals.

As stated before, *E. coli* is *naturally* found in some animals' intestines, but not all. The spread of the illness happens when people or parrots come into contact with fecal material from the intestine. When disease occurs, in birds in particular, it can take the form of an acute septicaemia (an over-all infection in the body), air sacculitis (inflammation of the air sacs of birds), synovitis (inflammation of the joints) with accompanying lameness, or a subacute pericarditis (an inflammation of the membrane surrounding the heart). A bird with these syndromes may be weak, lethargic, dehydrated, anorexic (not eating), diarrheic and fluffed up. Bacteria occurring in sufficient numbers to cause septicaemia can cause death.

The symptoms of this disease in people include: diarrhea, abdominal cramps, malaise, fever, dysentery (inflammation of intestinal tract). In more complicated cases shock and purpura (multiple small sites of bleeding in the skin and mucosa), bloody diarrhea and passing small amounts of urine can occur. If these happen, a doctor should be seen immediately. Symptoms usually begin within 3-4 days of coming into contact with the bacterium.

This disease is diagnosed by isolating the bacterium from specimens and then growing it on special media to identify it. Birds that are ill require parenteral (by needle) antibiotics, fluids to restore hydration and treatment with avian lactobacillus to help establish or restore proper intestinal flora. Normally healthy people usually get better without outside help; however, the elderly, young or immune compromised patient should seek a doctor's care, and again, help should also be sought in anyone with the complications mentioned above. Prevention is best: first and foremost - wash hands thoroughly *before and after* handling pet birds. Especially wash hands thoroughly after handling raw meat, going to the washroom or changing diapers. Clean all food preparation surfaces thoroughly after use. Use only pasteurized milk, dairy or juice products. Use only treated or chlorinated water for drinking and cleaning your bird's cages. Keep all bird areas (aviaries, enclosures, floors) relatively free of feces and food debris. These measures will help prevent the spread of *E. coli* from you to your bird, and back again.

Sources:

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This article is provided for information purposes only and should not replace a veterinarian's diagnosis. The World Parrot Trust encourages people caring for a parrot that is unwell to seek help from a qualified professional.