

Psittacosis: A Serious Illness in Parrots and Humans

By the World Parrot Trust

Psittacosis, also known as ornithosis or 'parrot fever,' is an infectious disease that occurs in birds and humans. The psittacosis bacterium, *Chlamydia psittaci*, has been isolated from more than 175 species of birds, most commonly psittacines (parrots). It is transmitted mainly by infected birds but also by some mammals. Human-to-human transmission has not been confirmed. Although rare, illness in people can be serious.

Psittacosis is spread through contact with or inhalation of the bacteria from contaminated dried feces, feather dust or, rarely, bird bites. Birds that appear to be healthy can sometimes be carriers, shedding the infectious agent in the feces. Symptoms of infection include:

In birds:

- Diarrhoea
- emaciation
- anorexia (not eating)
- ruffled appearance
- lethargy
- bright green urates (whitish part of dropping)
- occasionally seizures and other central nervous system signs
- conjunctivitis (eye inflammation) with discharge
- complications include problems with the kidneys, liver, air sacs and lungs

In people:

(illness can occur up to 4 weeks after exposure to an infected bird)

- high fever
- chills
- headache
- muscle aches
- cough
- rash
- in elderly and immunosuppressed people, pneumonia
- occasionally chest pain and enlarged spleen
- complications include brain swelling and inflammation of heart muscle or blood vessels

Both parrots and people can be tested for the disease, through blood tests, and managed successfully with antibiotics and supportive therapy. The treatment of choice is the tetracycline group of antibiotics, and this is administered to parrots via the feed. Treatment for the disease usually lasts 30-45 days for parrots and 14-21 days for humans. If your bird is diagnosed with psittacosis all other birds and people that have come into recent (in the last month) contact with it should be treated as a preventative measure.

Aviaries (including cages and building) containing ill birds should be cleaned and disinfected with household bleach diluted 1:100 with water (2 tablespoons of bleach in a gallon of water) or other disinfectant as directed. Masks and gloves should be worn by people cleaning these areas. Birds should be protected from disinfectant fumes.

Preventative measures taken before the onset of problems can protect you and your bird(s). These include not purchasing birds with signs of psittacosis or those which were kept in dirty or crowded conditions, and having an avian veterinarian check new birds and keep them isolated until it is determined they are free of disease. Taking these relatively simple precautions can help in keeping this disease from causing problems in your flock and family.

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.

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