

Psittacosis (Parrot Fever): Symptoms, Diagnosis, Treatment, and Prevention

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Psittacosis is also known as 'parrot fever,' ornithosis, or chlamydiosis. It is a widespread disease caused by an organism called *Chlamydophila psittaci*. Psittacosis can infect a variety of species including humans, birds, cows, cats, goats, sheep, and pigs. Among the bird species, it will infect just about anything with feathers including pet birds (psittacines), ratites, pigeons, poultry, ducks, and other migratory birds.

The transmission from bird to bird is primarily by inhalation of infected dust from droppings or respiratory secretions. It is often seen in birds that have been in close quarters such as quarantine stations, pet shops, or boarding facilities. Birds tend to shed the organism if stressed but may not show any signs of the disease.

Symptoms

No symptoms are specific to psittacosis. Birds can show any of the following signs: lack of appetite, weight loss, depression, listlessness, difficulty breathing, watery green droppings, pink eyes, discharge from eyes or nares, or sudden death. Those birds that are carriers and used for breeding can pass it to their offspring who may then die in the nest or at weaning or become carriers themselves.

Diagnosis

Psittacosis is difficult to diagnose. Screening tests are available through laboratories and new tests are being developed to help diagnose the condition faster and easier. A presumptive diagnosis of psittacosis is made based on history of being exposed to other birds in the preceding several weeks, clinical signs, x-rays, and blood work. If psittacosis is suspected, treatment should begin at once.

Treatment

Specific treatment and route of administration are left to the avian veterinarian. It is important that the birds be isolated from other birds on the premises. No immunity develops to the disease: reinfection even after treatment and full recovery is possible.

Prevention

Before a new bird comes into the household, it should have a veterinary examination and be isolated for at least six weeks. All birds should be purchased from a reputable supplier. These steps will help decrease the risk of bringing an infected bird into the household.

Transmission to humans

The chlamydial organism is capable of being transmitted from birds to humans. It is potentially dangerous for persons who are sick, elderly, or immunosuppressed (e.g. patients being treated for cancer or HIV/AIDS). Because the condition in humans may be misdiagnosed, anyone who is exposed to pet birds and who develops a prolonged case of the flu should seek the advice of a physician and make a point of telling their physician about their exposure to birds. To prevent psittacosis, wash your hands after handling your bird or cleaning the cage. Have any bird that shows signs of illness examined by your veterinarian.