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What is psittacosis?

Psittacosis is an infectious disease caused by *Chlamydia psittaci*, a type of bacteria that most often infects birds. While not a common cause of human illness, most people become ill from exposure to parrot-type birds kept as pets, although transmission has also been documented from contact with other types of birds.

Who gets psittacosis?

People of any age can get psittacosis. Persons at greatest risk include those who have routine contact with birds such as pet bird owners and breeders, pet shop employees, zoo employees, poultry workers and veterinarians. On average, fewer than 10 human cases of infection from *Chlamydia psittaci* are reported each year in the United States. The last reported case of psittacosis in Virginia occurred in 2003.

How is psittacosis spread?

The bacteria can infect people who care for and clean up after infected birds. Some infected birds can appear healthy or have subtle clinical signs while still shedding the bacteria in their feces and respiratory secretions. Human infection with *Chlamydia psittaci* usually occurs when a person inhales organisms that have been aerosolized from dried feces or respiratory tract secretions of infected birds. Less commonly, birds infect people through bites and beak-to-mouth contact.

What are the symptoms of psittacosis?

In general, psittacosis causes mild illness in people. These symptoms include fever, chills, headaches, muscle aches, and dry cough. Most people experience only mild illness. Only rarely have more severe outcomes, like pneumonia or death been reported. The signs of infection in birds are non-specific and include poor appetite, inflamed eyes, difficulty in breathing, and diarrhea. Infected birds do not always have symptoms or seem sick.

How soon after exposure do symptoms of psittacosis appear?

Most people begin developing signs and symptoms within 5 to 14 days after exposure to the bacteria. Less commonly, people report the start of symptoms after 14 days.

How is psittacosis diagnosed?

Psittacosis is a rarely reported condition, and the symptoms are like many other illnesses. For these reasons, clinicians may not suspect it, making it difficult to diagnose. Common methods used to diagnose the condition include taking blood samples to detect specific antibodies the body makes in response to the infection, or testing sputum (phlegm) or swabs from the nose and/or throat to detect

the bacteria directly.

What is the treatment for psittacosis?

People diagnosed with psittacosis usually take antibiotics to treat the infection. Most people improve quickly if they start antibiotics soon after they first get sick. Most people who get treatment for psittacosis make a full recovery.

How can psittacosis be prevented?

While there is no vaccine to prevent psittacosis, there are things you can do to protect yourself and others. Avoid purchasing ill birds. Maintain good records on purchased birds including the date of purchase and name of the seller. If you own pet birds or poultry, follow good precautions when handling and cleaning birds and cages. Clean the cages, position the cages so food, feces and feathers do not spread between them, avoid overcrowding, and isolate and treat infected birds.

How can I learn more about psittacosis?

- If you have concerns about psittacosis, contact your healthcare provider.
- Call your local health department. A directory of local health departments is located at the [VDH Local Health Districts page](#).
- Visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at [the CDC page on psittacosis](#).
- Visit the [NASPHV Psittacosis Compendium](#) to access the latest *Compendium of Measures to Control Chlamydia psittaci Infection Among Human (Psittacosis) and Pet Birds (Avian Chlamydiosis)*.

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