PSITTACOSIS

Introduction
Psittacosis is an infection of parrots and exotic birds, caused by a microorganism known as Chlamydia psittaci.

In humans, psittacosis can present itself as anything from a mild ‘flu-like illness, which can be treated easily with a short course of antibiotics, to a severe generalised infection, which in extremely rare cases can be fatal.

Infection in Birds
Chlamydia psittaci infects wild and domestic birds and poultry. Birds that can contract the infection include parrots, canaries, pigeons, chickens, ducks and turkeys.

Birds can have a latent infection. This means they appear healthy and do not show any symptoms initially, but some then show signs in the future. These infected birds carrying Chlamydia psittaci bacteria may shed the organism intermittently or sometimes continuously for weeks or months. Stress associated with nutritional deficiencies, overcrowding, breeding, egg-laying and prolonged transport may cause birds with a latent infection to shed infectious agents. When shedding occurs, the infected birds excrete the bacteria in the faeces and nasal discharges and can remain infective for several months.

Source of Infection in Birds
The organism is shed in the nasal secretions and in the stool from infected birds, recovering birds and carriers. Once outside the body, the organism can live for a long period of time, drying in dust that infects the susceptible hosts as they breathe. Faecal and oral contaminations are especially significant in crowded conditions, as well as in nest boxes. As a general rule, inhaled Chlamydia causes severe disease, while ingested Chlamydia tends to produce fever symptoms – infected animals become carriers.
**Diagnosis**

The time between exposure to *Chlamydia psittaci* and the onset of illness in caged birds ranges from three days to several weeks. Sick birds show signs of:

- Sleepiness
- Shivering
- Weight loss
- Breathing difficulties
- Diarrhoea

Diagnosis of *Chlamydia psittaci* in birds is definitive only if the organism is identified, isolated or causes a predictable physiological response. The identification of the organism is made by stains or a fluorescent antibody test.

**Treatment and Prevention in Birds**

Most vets treat with an antibiotic. The antibiotic can be given by intravenous or intramuscular injections, orally or mixed in proper ratios with palatable food.

Patients in chlamydial crisis need intense, supportive care (heat, isolation, extremely clean conditions, absence from stress etc) as well as therapy for concurrent problems. The veterinary surgeon will prescribe antibiotics for the patients under his or her care.

**Psittacosis and Humans**

Humans can become infected with *Chlamydia psittaci* by breathing in the organism when the respiratory secretions, or dried faeces of infected birds are dispersed in the air as dust. Other sources of exposure include mouth-to-beak contact, a bite from an infected bird, and handling the plumage and tissues of infected birds.
The infection in humans varies in severity from a mild ‘flu-like illness to severe pneumonia. Generally the signs and symptoms appear within four to 15 days after exposure. These include:

- Fever
- Chills
- Cough
- Weakness or fatigue
- Muscles and chest pain
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Diarrhoea
- Headache
- Sweating
- Abnormal intolerance to light

Psittacosis is primarily a lung disease but it can involve several organs. Some reports show that inflammation of the liver, lining of the heart cavity, the heart muscle and the brain can occur.

The course of the disease is variable and while usually mild, it can be fatal in extremely rare cases. Even in mild cases the fever may continue for three weeks or more.
Diagnosis, Treatment and Prevention in Humans

For accurate diagnosis of psittacosis, a doctor must be told that the person has been exposed to birds and that the suspected birds are infected with *Chlamydia psittaci*. Laboratory examinations can identify the organism and detect the signs of infection. Patients who develop psittacosis require treatment with specific drugs. The disease is very responsive to tetracycline but is resistant to penicillin.

Conclusion

Psittacosis – sometimes called ‘Bird Fancier’s Lung’ – is an infectious disease in humans that has mild, non-specific ‘flu-like symptoms. Psittacosis refers to any infection or disease caused by *Chlamydia psittaci*, one of several microorganisms in the genus Chlamydia. This disease can be transmitted from infected birds to humans. Parrot disease, ornithosis, and chlamydiosis are other names for psittacosis.

Pets are Good for People

Pets provide us with loyalty, companionship, love and affection, as well as the many physical and psychological benefits. The least we can do to repay this is to ensure that we keep them in the best of health. A healthy pet is a happy pet and a happy pet can help us enjoy a much fuller and more rewarding life.

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For further information, please contact the Pet Health Council on:

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