

Psittacosis (Ornithosis)

An infection of the lung caused by the bacterium *Chlamydophila (Chlamydia) psittaci*. The bacteria causing the disease are carried by wild and domesticated birds and it is likely that all birds are susceptible.

Even apparently healthy birds can shed *Chlamydophila psittaci*. People become infected when they inhale the bacteria from dried nose and eye secretions, droppings or dust from feathers of infected birds. Infection is a hazard in pet shop employees, pet owners, poultry farm and abattoir workers, and veterinarians. Infection has been transmitted to gardeners spreading chicken manure on gardens. However, about one-quarter of people who get psittacosis have no history of obvious exposure to birds.

Symptoms are very varied, but commonly include:

- > fever
- > cough, usually without much sputum
- > headache
- > rash
- > muscle aches
- > chest pain
- > shortness of breath
- > sore throat
- > swollen lymph glands.

Illness ranges from mild through to severe and is sometimes fatal.

The diagnosis is suspected following a clinical examination, especially if the patient has a history of exposure to birds. The diagnosis is confirmed by a series of blood tests and a chest X-ray.

Incubation period

(time between becoming infected and developing symptoms)

From 1 – 4 weeks.

Infectious period

(time during which an infected person can infect others)

Person-to-person spread is unlikely to occur. Apparently healthy as well as diseased birds may shed the bacteria for months. Re-infection of people and birds may occur.

Treatment

Specific and effective antibiotic therapy is available.

Control of spread

- > Sick birds should be treated promptly by a veterinarian.
- > Close contact with birds, especially kissing, should be discouraged.
- > Clean bird cages regularly, including water and food trays, using gloves and a wet cleaning method to minimise inhalation of bird droppings.
- > Exclude birds from roof spaces prior to blocking access to the birds.
- > Tissues used by patients should be disposed of carefully.
- > Exclusion from school or work is not necessary.



Psittacosis (Ornithosis) is a notifiable disease