

# New York State Department of Health

## Psittacosis (ornithosis, parrot fever, chlamydiosis)

Updated: September 2008

### What is psittacosis?

Psittacosis is an infectious disease usually transmitted to humans from birds in the parrot family, turkeys and pigeons. Birds in the parrot family, or psittacines, include parrots, macaws, budgerigars (parakeets), and cockatiels. The disease is caused by a bacteria called *Chlamydophila psittaci*.

### Who gets psittacosis?

Because this disease is spread by birds in the parrot family, it is occasionally found in pet store workers and people who have purchased an infected bird. It may also be found in farmers and slaughterhouse workers who process turkeys.

### How is psittacosis spread?

Psittacosis is usually spread by inhaling dust from dried droppings from bird cages and by handling infected birds in slaughterhouses. Human-to-human spread has not been reported. Waste material in the bird cage may remain infectious for weeks.

### What are the symptoms of psittacosis?

In humans, the symptoms are fever, headache, chills and sometimes pneumonia. Some people may only experience mild flu-like illness, or show no illness at all. In birds, the symptoms include poor appetite, ruffled appearance, eye or nose discharge and diarrhea. Occasionally, birds may die from psittacosis. Some birds may shed the organism while exhibiting no symptoms.

### How soon after infection do symptoms appear?

The incubation period typically ranges from five to 14 days, but longer incubations have been reported.

### How is psittacosis diagnosed?

A number of different tests are available for humans and birds. Updated information is available from the national Compendium of Measures to Control Chlamydophila Psittaci Infection Among Humans (Psittacosis) and Pet Birds (Avian Chlamydiosis), 2008, available at:

<http://www.nyhealth.gov/diseases/communicable/zoonoses/psittacosis.htm>.

### Does past infection with psittacosis make a person immune?

Infection does not provide permanent immunity to this disease.

### What is the treatment for psittacosis?

Antibiotics such as tetracycline or doxycycline are often prescribed for treating infected people.

### What can be the effect of not being treated for psittacosis?

The disease may be severe, and result in death, especially in untreated older people.

### What can be done to prevent the spread of psittacosis?

If birds are kept as pets, clean the cage often so that fecal material does not accumulate, dry up and become airborne. Test and/or separate birds that have been in contact with other birds outside the home to reduce the chance of bird-to-bird spread. Consult with a veterinarian for all bird illnesses. If a person develops signs of psittacosis, consult with a physician and mention any bird contact to the physician.

Revised: November 2008