

PSITTACOSIS (Ornithosis)

What is Psittacosis?

Psittacosis is an illness characterized by fever, chills, headache, photophobia (the avoidance of light), cough, and muscle aches. It is caused by an infection with a bacteria known as *Chlamydia psittaci*.

Who gets psittacosis?

Anyone can get psittacosis if they are infected with the *C. psittaci* bacteria, and the most common source of these bacteria are infected birds. Pet birds of the psittacine family (specifically parakeets, parrots and love birds) are the most common birds to be infected, but other birds such as poultry, pigeons, canaries and sea birds may also be infected. Birds who are infected may appear healthy or sick.

How is psittacosis spread?

Humans become infected with psittacosis when they inhale *C. psittaci* bacteria that are present in dried bird droppings, feather dust or other secretions of infected birds. Person-to-person spread of psittacosis is very unlikely.

What are the symptoms of psittacosis?

The symptoms include fever, chills, headache, rash, photophobia, muscle aches and either upper or lower respiratory tract disease. Pneumonia is common with psittacosis.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

This can range from one to four weeks.

How is psittacosis diagnosed?

The laboratory criteria for diagnosis include:

- Isolation of *Chlamydia psittaci* bacteria from respiratory secretions, or
- An increase in the blood of antibodies that are specific for *C. psittaci*
- Presence in the blood of specific antibodies that would indicate that the person was recently infected with *C. psittaci*
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A case of psittacosis is *probable* when there is a clinically compatible case that is epidemiologically linked to a confirmed case or if the person has an increase in the blood of antibodies that are specific for *C. psittaci*.

A case of psittacosis is *confirmed* when a clinically compatible case is also laboratory confirmed.

What is the treatment for psittacosis?

Doctors can prescribe antibiotics for psittacosis.

How can psittacosis be prevented?

To prevent psittacosis in humans, it is necessary to prevent the exposure of humans to infected birds. Parakeets, parrots and love birds (as well as any other pet) should only be purchased from reputable sources. People who work with poultry or other birds should inform their health care provider of their occupation in the event that they develop a respiratory illness.

Where can I get more information?

- Your personal doctor or veterinarian.
- Your local health department, listed in your telephone directory.
- The Utah Department of Health, Bureau of Epidemiology (801) 538-6191.

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Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Case definitions for infectious conditions under public health surveillance. MMWR 1997; 46 (No. RR-10):27.