



Psittacosis in Birds

Introduction

Psittacosis is a disease caused by the bacteria *Chlamydia psittaci* and has also been called chlamydiosis, chlamydia, ornithosis or parrot fever, and is a common cause of illness in many bird species. This information sheet discusses the implications of infection with this organism, and the potential for human transmission of the disease.

Transmission

Infection is mainly transmitted via inhalation or ingestion of contaminated dust from feathers or droppings of infected birds. Close contact and poor ventilation increase the risk of infection. Additionally, physiological stress increases both susceptibility to the disease and the amount of infection shed by infected birds.

Clinical signs

Some actively infected birds may be carriers for the disease, and show no clinical signs at all. These birds may appear healthy until subjected to a stressful incident, and then become ill. Clinical signs of infection tend to be breathing problems, diarrhoea or lime-green urates. Other symptoms include poor appetite, weight loss, being fluffed and disinterested in the surroundings, and nasal or ocular discharge. Unfortunately, these signs are not specific for this disease, and may indicate other illness. It is important to seek veterinary advice if you notice these symptoms in your bird, as Psittacosis left untreated can be fatal. Young birds are more susceptible than adult birds.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis is either by checking for the body's response to infection (Immunocomb test looks for antibodies) or by testing for the presence of the organism (antigen testing, polymerase chain reaction/ PCR). Interpretation of test results requires an understanding of the mechanism of each test, and the situation and health of the bird being tested. Brisbane Bird and Exotics Veterinary Service will assess your situation individually, and recommend an appropriate test.

Treatment

If Psittacosis has been diagnosed in your bird, then your bird and all birds that have been in the same air space will need to be treated. It is crucial that infected birds are isolated at the beginning of treatment until they have stopped shedding the disease. This amount of time varies depending on the route and type of medication. Treatment will need to be continued for at least 45 days.



There are several different ways to medicate your bird, including injections, oral medication, and in water medication - we will recommend an appropriate regimen after discussions with you. Your bird may require additional supportive treatment, which will be discussed with you if required.

During treatment, the cage and premises should be regularly cleaned with an appropriate disinfectant (see our care sheet on Effective Cleaning). Mineral supplements containing calcium should be removed, as they will interfere with medication, and the birds should be kept in a stress-free environment.

It is recommended that your bird be rechecked after the treatment course has finished. We will discuss the type and timing of recheck examinations with you at the time of diagnosis.

Transmission to humans

Chlamydia psittaci can be transmitted from birds to people, although it is rare. Human infections are more common in the elderly, pregnant, sick or very young, or immunocompromised patients (chemotherapy, transplant, HIV patients, etc). Asthmatic people may also be at an increased risk.

Signs in humans resemble a persistent flu – respiratory distress, fever, chills, headache, weakness, fatigue and muscle aches. People with persistent signs should immediately seek medical advice, informing their doctor that they have pet birds. Treatment is simple and most often successful, but delayed diagnosis or treatment can have severe consequences. *Chlamydia psittaci* is different from the organism that causes genital Chlamydia in humans.

Preventative measures

The following measures will help to reduce the risk of Psittacosis.

- Take all newly purchased birds for a post-purchase check, including Psittacosis testing (Immunocomb test or PCR).
- Isolate and quarantine newly acquired birds for a minimum of 6 weeks.
- Maintain excellent preventative health management (quality, balanced diet, regular and frequent cleaning and disinfection of cage).
- Provide good ventilation.

