

Psittacosis

Background Information

Psittacosis (also known as ornithosis or parrot fever) is primarily an infection of birds. It can be transmitted to humans by breathing in infected material or occasionally by oral infection. It is generally associated with exposure to infected pet birds or poultry.

Organism

Chlamydophila psittaci (previously known as *Chlamydia psittaci*)

Incidence and Transmission

Psittacosis is uncommon in the UK, with around 50 cases each year in England and Wales.

It is transmitted from birds to humans by breathing in aerosols or dust of contaminated material, eg dried faeces or feathers. Alternatively infection may be oral, usually via infected plumage or feathers. Only brief exposure to infected material is required for infection.

Psittacosis is not generally spread from person to person.

Occupations and processes where psittacosis may present a risk

Occupational exposure to *Chlamydophila psittaci* may occur in those who:

- are in contact with infected birds; or
- work with materials or products from infected birds, particularly dried faeces.

Occupations where there may be a risk of occupationally acquired psittacosis include:

- poultry farmers;
- bird keepers;
- pet shop workers;
- zoo and bird park keepers;
- street cleaners;
- demolition/building renovation/building conservation workers – where birds have been nesting;
- veterinary surgeons; and
- poultry processing plant workers – particularly during evisceration.

Clinical Information

The incubation period is 1–4 weeks.

Symptoms are often flu-like, with fever, headache, muscle ache and respiratory tract symptoms, although the disease can progress to severe pneumonia and other non-respiratory health problems.

Anyone with these symptoms and who may have been in contact with infected birds should consult their GP. Antibiotic treatment is available.

Control

The following control measures reduce the risk of infection:

- There should be good ventilation in bird housing.
- New or sick birds should be kept isolated.
- Bird cages should be cleaned regularly, to prevent faeces drying out.
- Cleaning procedures should avoid creating aerosols and dust, eg high pressure jet washing should not be used.
- Suitable protective clothing should be worn, eg when removing dried faeces or in poultry processing plants.
- If possible, evisceration lines in poultry processing plants should be enclosed with local exhaust ventilation (LEV).
- A suitable disinfectant should be used.
- Good occupational hygiene practices should be followed, particularly washing hands with soap and warm water.

Further Information

[Public Health England – Psittacosis](#)