

Respiratory Disease in Birds

Chlamydiosis is a respiratory disease in birds caused by a bacterium called *Chlamydia psittaci*, its frequently seen in parrots, chickens, pigeons and wild birds and should always be considered when purchasing a new pet bird

Chlamydiosis is spread from bird to bird and bird to person (Psittacosis) by droplets of respiratory secretions when the bird sneezes or via faeces that is ingested or inhaled on feather dust particles. A naive bird (that has never been exposed to this bacteria) may contract the infection in a pet shop, aviary of mixed birds, or when placed in contact with another bird who is a carrier. Being within the same close air-space is enough to catch the infection and a person may be exposed to it just by spending time with the bird. People most likely to contract the bacterial infection include the elderly, babies and people with pre-existing respiratory diseases or who are immunocompromised.

It is possible for birds to reach "carrier status" which may be life long. This means any birds placed within the same room as a carrier bird have the potential to contract the infection because it is shed intermittently. In both birds and people the disease can be fatal if a naive bird or person is exposed to a carrier bird for the first time. On occasions the illness is very severe and develops in a matter of days. In birds clinical signs include sneezing, sinusitis, lethargy, inappetence and diarrhoea. In people the disease often presents as a chronic cough, severe headaches, sinusitis and can lead to pneumonia.

Chlamydiosis may be detected with a blood test to look for any antibodies produced by the bird's immune system in response to exposure to the bacteria. This blood test is performed as an "in-house" test, or in an aviary situation with several ill birds the faeces can be sent away for a PCR test to detect the presence of the bacteria, however this method is not very reliable unless the birds are very ill. Every bird in the household that was in indirect contact with the infected bird should be tested and a blood test should be repeated annually until the antibody level is reduced to a very low level or no antibodies are detected and no birds show repeated signs of illness.

Usually affected birds will require hospitalisation until they are eating well and the severe illness has subsided, as well as given a course of antibiotics for a total of 6-8 weeks. Previously infected birds may have the infection return in their lifetime even after treatment, this is usually due to stress from changes in environment or household, new people, new pets, a change in diet or other underlying illnesses or injuries.

To prevent the spread of Chlamydiosis avoid purchasing birds that have any clinical signs or appear unwell, quarantine them for at least 30 days and have each new bird examined and tested prior to introducing them to existing pet birds or family. Position cages so droppings, feathers, food and materials can't spread from one cage to another, do not stack cages and use solid barriers between cages if positioned next to each other, ensure there is adequate ventilation and light, use dust free floor coverings such as newspaper, clean cages and bowls daily with a disinfectant solution such as F10 and isolate any birds that appear to be ill.