

## **PSITTACOSIS/CHLAMYDIOSIS IN PET BIRDS**

**Psittacosis/Chlamydiosis** (also known as “parrot fever”) is a widespread disease caused by an organism called *Chlamydia psittaci*. This disease is potentially transmissible to humans, therefore we recommend that ALL new birds be tested for this disease.

### **TRANSMISSION**

Transmission of chlamydiosis is primarily through inhalation of contaminated dust from droppings of feathers. Risk of infection is increased by close contact with infected birds that are shedding the organism. For this reason, the disease is more common in stressed birds (crowded conditions, moving, new pets in the household, heat/cold stress, owners on vacation, malnutrition, etc.) since birds tend to shed the organism when stressed. Infected birds do not have to show symptoms of the illness in order to transmit the disease.

### **CLINICAL SIGNS**

There are no specific signs that are characteristic of psittacosis. Some symptoms are: lack of appetite, weight loss, depression and listlessness, watery, lime-green droppings, discharge and/or redness from eyes or nostrils, or even sudden death. It is often referred to as the “one eyed cold” because in some birds the only symptom is that one eye is inflamed. **Many birds that are infected with chlamydia show no signs of illness**. Breeding birds can pass the organism to their young. Young birds are more susceptible to a severe debilitating infection than are adult birds.

### **TRANSMISSION TO HUMANS**

*Chlamydia psittaci* is capable of being transmitted from birds to humans, although the incidence of transmission is rare considering the high incidence of infection in birds. If anyone in the household with an infected bird develops persistent flu-like symptoms, cough, fever, chills, headache, weakness, or fatigue, that person should seek the advice of a physician as soon as possible. Although psittacosis infection in humans is normally mild, neglect of the symptoms or delayed diagnosis may result in serious illness. It is potentially dangerous for persons who are sick, elderly or immunosuppressed (e.g. AIDS patients). *Chlamydia psittaci* is not the same organism that causes genital chlamydia infection in humans. Because the condition in humans may be misdiagnosed, anyone who is exposed to pet birds and who develops a prolonged case of the flu or respiratory symptoms should seek the advice of a physician.

### **DIAGNOSIS**

A confirmed diagnosis of chlamydiosis in a live bird can be difficult and depends on the species, length of time since exposure, and general condition of the bird. In addition to producing disease, chlamydia undermines the immune system and opens the body to a host of other pathogens; thus, bacterial or viral disorders may be occurring at the same time. Because it is far easier to diagnose a bacterial problem, the chlamydiosis may be missed.

There are currently about 5 different tests for psittacosis. There is no single diagnostic test in the live bird that is 100% accurate, so all test results must be interpreted

in light of the patient's condition and history. We may recommend treatment of suspected cases with or without a positive test result, and may be able to make a *presumptive* diagnosis of psittacosis based on history, clinical signs, bloodwork or other diagnostic methods. The screening test we currently recommend costs approximately \$65.

## TREATMENT

If psittacosis has been diagnosed in one of your birds, or if we recommend treatment, all exposed and potentially infected birds in the household should be treated at the same time. It is imperative that infected birds be isolated during treatment and that certain sanitary measures be employed to prevent spread or reinfection of the disease.

The success of treatment depends on all of the medication being given in the recommended dosage. Depending on the condition of the patient, other supportive treatment may be recommended as well. **Treatment must be continued for a minimum of 45 days to be effective.** There is no immunity to the disease, and birds are susceptible to reinfection even after full recovery or previous treatment.

During treatment, you must:

- Clean the premises with an appropriate disinfectant;
- Use caution when handling droppings and cage debris, take care not to stir up dust while cleaning, keeping dust and feather circulation to a minimum.
- Separate/isolate and seek medical care for other birds showing signs of disease.
- Avoid contact with the birds by elderly, pregnant, sick or very young persons on anti-rejection drugs.
- Remove all mineral supplements containing calcium as calcium interferes with the medication.
- Reduce stress in the bird's environment as much as possible.
- Follow all treatment instructions as prescribed.

## PREVENTATIVE MEASURES

The following recommendations help reduce the incidence of chlamydia:

- Immediately after purchase, bring all newly-acquired birds for a complete physical exam and chlamydiosis screening test
- Buy birds from suppliers who routinely screen their birds for the presence of chlamydia or who are willing to stand behind the health of their birds in some manner (health guarantee);
- **Isolate and quarantine all newly acquired birds for a minimum of six weeks.**