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Psittacosis (*Chlamydia Psittaci* Infections) in Pet Birds

By Eva Wallner-Pendleton, Extension Veterinarian

Companion birds continue to increase in popularity as pets in the United States. Birds most frequently kept belong to the family psittacidae, or the parrot family. Although domestic breeding of parrots is becoming more widespread, a large number of birds are still imported from outside the United States. By law, these birds must enter the country through quarantine stations. There they spend at least 30 days and are tested for disease and fed food containing tetracycline, an antibiotic. The antibiotic treatment is to hopefully eliminate infections with *Chlamydia psittaci*, the bacterium that causes psittacosis.

Psittacosis is a complex disease that affects many species of wild birds, and occasionally, humans that are in close contact with birds. The organism is shed in the feces and respiratory secretions of infected birds. Other birds pick up the organism by inhaling contaminated aerosols. Although infected birds may become extremely ill and die, most birds usually become asymptomatic carriers. They carry the organism in their bodies, shed the organism in their feces, but do not become ill, unless severely stressed. Without specific tests, it can be difficult to differentiate a negative from a positive psittacosis carrier.

Psittacosis infections in people are usually mild, resulting in non-specific flu-like symptoms. Occasionally, however, severe bacterial pneumonia may occur which may require hospitalization. If untreated, psittacosis infections in humans may rarely result in death. Fortunately, the disease is very responsive to tetracycline therapy.

Despite the treatment of all quarantined birds for psittacosis infections, the disease continues to be widespread in pet bird populations in the United States. There are many reasons for this high prevalence. For the treatment to be effective, the medicated food must be consumed for at least 30 to 45 days. Unfortunately, parrots are often extremely wary of new foods, and may initially eat little if any of the medicated diet. This may result in several days of too little antibiotic being consumed. The animal may then continue to be infected with psittacosis after leaving quarantine. Another reason this infection may be widespread is because of illegal smuggling of birds the United States. Since these birds are not treated or tested, they frequently harbor diseases including psittacosis.

After leaving quarantine, birds are usually purchased by large distributing operations. A distributor may have hundreds or thousands of birds at any one location. These are then sold to bird breeders or pet stores. At each distribution point, birds come into contact with large numbers of other birds. Conditions are often crowded, allowing diseases to spread quickly. The incidence of psittacosis, which is probably an uncommon disease in the wild, is thus greatly increased.

So how can the prospective buyer of a pet bird be assured that the animal purchased is free from psittacosis or other infectious diseases? Several steps are suggested.

- 1) The seller (pet store) should be able to give the buyer a basic history of the bird, including previous owners, if it was a domestic raised or imported bird, and other pertinent information.
- 2) Look for general signs of health in a bird including presence of a shiny, tight feathering covering of the body.
- 3) Look for firm, not runny, stools in the prospective pet. The stool is usually dark green, with some white portions.
- 4) Eyes and nostrils should be free of any discharge.
- 5) The body condition can be assessed by checking the breast muscles and breast bone(keel). Healthy birds are well-fleshed in this area, and the breast bone can barely be felt.
- 6) If the bird passes the above criteria, then insist on a prepurchase examination by a veterinarian with experience in treating birds.
- 7) The examination should include:
 - a. fecal bacteria and parasite check
 - b. basic avian blood panel
 - c. psittacosis antibody and/or antigen test

These steps will help insure that the new pet will be free from psittacosis and be in good health. It is important to follow your veterinarian's recommendations on nutrition, housing, and general safety precautions in the home. These recommendations will help maintain your pet bird's health for many years to come.

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