



Questions you may have about YOUR BIRD AND YOUR HEALTH



Provided in cooperation with The Humane Society of the United States

This brochure will review some of the common health concerns that arise for people who have birds as companion animals. For more information on other companion animals or for more general information, see the **Safe Pet Guidelines** published by PAWS.



Zoonoses: No, it is not what you find on the faces of elephants. Zoonoses (pronounced ZO-uh-NO-seez) refers to those diseases that can be acquired by humans from other animals. Until recently, zoonotic diseases touched few lives in this country.

Am I at risk for contracting a disease from my bird?

Current evidence supports the fact that pets pose a minimal risk. Your risk may be slightly higher if you fall into one of the following groups:

- People with compromised immune systems
- People with AIDS/HIV
- People on chemotherapy
- People who have received organ or bone marrow transplants
- People who are elderly
- People born with congenital immune deficiencies
- Pregnant women (a fetus's immune system is not fully developed)

Can bird diseases make me sick?

Yes. Diseases such as Mycobacterium Avian Complex (MAC), Psittacosis (Parrot Fever), and *Salmonella* are the primary diseases associated with pet birds that can be potentially transmitted to humans. Allergic Alveolitis can also develop in sensitive humans. Some birds can carry the intestinal parasite *Giardia*. It is unlikely that you will acquire an infection from your bird, but caution is always advised, especially for higher risk groups.

What are the chances that my bird has one of these infections?

That depends on the species of bird, its source, age, and general health status. Newly adopted birds and birds undergoing other stresses are always more risky. A

veterinarian experienced in avian medicine should be consulted to evaluate your particular situation.

How can I tell if my bird has an infection?

There are no specific symptoms characteristic of each disease. If your bird stops eating, loses weight, has vomiting or diarrhea, appears fluffed up and chilled, or just is not right, then your bird should be seen by a veterinarian immediately.

How do I get these diseases from my bird?

These diseases can be transmitted by direct contact with stool and nasal discharge or by breathing dried, powdered droppings.

Can I acquire these diseases from sources other than my bird?

Yes. In fact, it is much more common to acquire these diseases from the environment, undercooked or contaminated foods, or in some cases, from other people. Complete avoidance is impossible.

What happens if I get any of these diseases?

MAC (Mycobacterium Avian Complex - also known as Atypical Mycobacterium - a disease similar to Tuberculosis) is most commonly acquired from the environment, can cause a variety of symptoms, and is suspected to be involved with AIDS wasting syndrome. MAC is a lifelong infection, which can be reactivated as the immune system deteriorates. There are now drugs that can help control human infections of MAC.

For more information, contact:

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THE BENEFITS OF ANIMAL COMPANIONSHIP OUTWEIGH THE RISKS!

Psittacosis produces flu-like symptoms and is usually accompanied by a dry, nonproductive cough and fever. Psittacosis can be acquired multiple times. To date, there are no reported cases of Psittacosis in people with HIV/AIDS.

Salmonella causes fever and gastrointestinal symptoms including stomach cramps and diarrhea. *Salmonella* infections can occur repeatedly and an infected person can become a chronic carrier without showing any symptoms.

Allergic Alveolitis produces coughing and difficulty breathing. Allergic Alveolitis is a progressive respiratory disease and can be alleviated by total avoidance of bird dander, feathers and in some cases poultry products.

If you are diagnosed with any of these diseases, your physician will outline a treatment plan. Once again, we must emphasize the likelihood of acquiring these infections from your pet bird is quite low.

Are there other bird-associated illnesses?

Yes, the list is long, but the above four diseases are by far the most common. Good sanitation and keeping your bird healthy is the best prevention for most infectious diseases.

How do I prevent my bird from getting these diseases?

- Never expose your bird to other birds that have not been tested for Psittacosis and quarantined for 45 days. It is especially important to avoid contact with pigeons and other wild birds.
- Avoid situations in which your bird will have casual contact with other birds (such as going to the pet store for wing clips and nail trims). Ideally, birds should be cared for at home rather than in boarding facilities.
- All sick birds should be seen by a veterinarian as soon as possible.

How can I prevent myself from getting these diseases?

- Good sanitation and hygiene. See **Safe Pet Guidelines** for more information.
- Cleaning your bird's cage liner regularly.
- If you are in a higher risk category, use a surgical mask when cleaning your bird's cage.
- Wash your hands after contact with birds.
- Avoid contact with wild birds including pigeons.

How can I adopt a safe bird?

- Only buy from a reputable source and only buy domestically bred birds. No imports or wild-caught birds.
- Do not buy birds that have been housed with imported birds.
- Avoid pet store birds and any bird that appears sick.
- Always set up a post-adoption veterinary visit to have your bird examined and to get all of your questions answered.

Should my bird be tested for any of these diseases?

Since each situation is different, your veterinarian will be better able to make recommendations for your particular situation. In general, we do not recommend routine screening for MAC or *Salmonella* because even some birds carrying these diseases will have a negative test result. In general, all newly acquired birds in the parrot family should be tested for Psittacosis.

How do I locate a veterinarian who has experience with birds?

Contact your state or local veterinary medical association, or the Association for Avian Veterinarians (AAV) at PO Box 811720, Boca Raton, FL 33481, or call (561)393-8901. AAV also publishes a great brochure on Psittacosis.

If I have further questions who can I contact?

Your physician, a veterinarian experienced in treating avian species and Pets Are Wonderful Support.

Pets Are Wonderful Support is a volunteer, non-profit group that helps improve the quality of life for persons with HIV disease, by offering them emotional and practical support in keeping the love and companionship of their pets, and by providing information on the benefits and risks of animal companionship.

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Please contact us for information on similar programs in your area.

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