

Avian Zoonoses

Learn how to protect yourself!

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How To Protect Yourself From Avian Zoonoses

By Rebecca Sweat

Pet birds can be a wonderful source of companionship, affection and entertainment. But they can also be a source of zoonoses--diseases that can be transmitted between animals and people. Fortunately for bird owners, the odds of an indoor pet bird passing on a zoonose to a human are rather slim. Still, there are some fairly troublesome avian zoonoses out there. As a bird owner, you need to know what they are so that you can keep yourself safe.

The most well-known avian zoonose is psittacosis (or "parrot fever"), which is caused by the organism, *Chlamydophila psittaci*. In humans, it causes flu-like symptoms such as a high fever, chills, severe headaches and shortness of breath, and it can be fatal if left untreated. Each year, the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia, confirms between 30 and 100 cases of psittacosis in people.

Considering the millions of birds that are kept as pets in this country, the numbers of humans contracting psittacosis is really quite low, noted North Carolina avian veterinarian, Gregory Burkett, DVM. "It is somewhat uncommon for people to contract this disease," he said. "However, it does occur, and individuals with compromised immune systems are much more susceptible." People with HIV/AIDS, those who are undergoing chemotherapy or who have received organ or bone marrow transplants, the elderly and very young children are at highest risk of developing psittacosis if they are exposed to the bacteria.

There are a few other zoonoses that can potentially be passed from birds to people. Zoonotic bacteria that can be transmitted from birds to people include salmonellosis, cryptosporidiosis and campylobacteriosis. In humans, these pathogens can cause diarrhea, gastroenteritis, nausea, vomiting, cramps and fever.

Two viruses that could theoretically be passed from birds to people are the West Nile virus and the Exotic Newcastle Disease virus. The good news is there have been very few, if any, confirmed cases of companion birds passing on these two diseases to people.

All in all, the chances of you contracting psittacosis or other zoonotic diseases from your bird is really quite slim. Still, don't take any chances. Veterinarians recommend the following cautionary measures to prevent the spread of zoonoses:

Wash your hands frequently with antibacterial soap, especially after handling your bird or cleaning its cage and before eating, cooking food or smoking.

Wear gloves when handling a sick bird or cleaning its cage.

Don't put anything your parrot has had contact with into your mouth.

Don't allow your bird eat off your plate, drink from your cup or glass, or nibble on the same food you are eating.

Never give wet kisses to your birds.

Be knowledgeable about the zoonotic agents you could be exposed to, and know the symptoms of illness in birds and in humans.

Take your parrot to the veterinary clinic for regular check-ups and at the first sign of health problems.

With some precautionary measures and a little common sense, the only thing your parrot will give you is love and affection!