

Psittacosis Confirmed In Five States

About two dozen birds were found ill in national Psittacosis outbreak

By Rose Gordon

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More than 500 birds were tested when a national outbreak of psittacosis appeared in national pet store chains.

Washington officials said as many as 20 Petsmarts in 11 counties may have received some of the birds from the Florida supplier. Dorothy Tibbetts, manager of Washington's Zoonotic Disease Program, said six Petsmart cockatiels at a single store had tested positive for the bacteria sometime in early November.

Petsmart temporarily suspended bird sales at 775 of its stores in 46 states due to ongoing concerns of a bacteria infection that sickened at least 22 of its birds as well as several birds at a Petland in Minnesota and quarantined birds at a Superpetz in Georgia.

More than 500 birds in Petsmarts across the country underwent routine testing. Results revealed psittacosis in 20 cockatiels, one finch and one budgie (parakeet). On December 19, 2007, the retailer temporarily suspended bird sales at any of its stores that received birds from a single vendor, Preferred Birds of Milton, Fla., according to Jennifer Simmons, a spokesperson for Petsmart. During the temporary sales suspension, Petsmart is treating all of the birds that might have been exposed to the bacteria with antibiotic-treated feed, Simmons said. Employees are also using masks, gloves and protective gowns before entering bird areas. "Most of this is just precautionary," Simmons said.

Although the birds remain in their aviaries in the stores, they are enclosed in glass aviaries and posted signs telling the public they are not for sale, Simmons said.

In Georgia, 2,940 birds were under quarantine at 34 Petsmart stores and a Superpetz store in Martinez, Ga., which had also received birds from Preferred Birds, according to the Georgia Dept. of Agriculture. Psittacosis was not discovered at Superpetz but two Georgia Petsmart birds died of the infection, Commissioner of Agriculture Tommy Irvin said.

A call to Superpetz's Pennsylvania headquarters was not immediately returned. "Petsmart had already begun a quarantine, but the quarantine did not meet all state requirements," Irvin said Dec. 28. "The quarantine will last 45 days or until released by our state veterinarian."

Today Georgia reported it is investigating several new potential cases of the disease in a Savannah Petsmart, Irvin said.

After a cockatiel with psittacosis was found in a Petsmart in Gaithersburg, Md., local officials ordered all birds removed from the sale floor while the retailer initiated a 45-day treatment plan for the birds, according to Katherine Feldman, the state's public health veterinarian.

In Florida, Danielle Stanek, a veterinarian and the state health department's medical epidemiologist, said one pet store cockatiel tested positive for the bacteria and was under treatment, but she declined to name the store. The Florida vendor where the sick birds appear to have originated from also voluntarily quarantined its stock and is no longer selling birds while they receive antibiotic treatment, Stanek said.

Other states, including Washington and Connecticut, issued warnings to consumers to be on alert for the disease despite no initial evidence of sick birds or people.

A part-time Petland employee responsible for cleaning animal cages at the Minnesota store informed the store's owner she was ill with psittacosis, Washburn said. Joni Scheffel, the state public health veterinarian, later confirmed the employee's illness, saying the employee was never hospitalized and was recovering. The state is conducting an ongoing investigation into the incident, Scheffel said, and so far it has interviewed 35 Petland employees and contacted 20 customers. No other states reported a human case of psittacosis.

Petland also received birds from Preferred Birds of Florida, a vendor it has used for all of its new store openings since

August 2007, according to Washburn. Preferred Birds warned Petland of a possible problem with psittacosis Dec. 21 and sent it testing materials Dec. 22, which subsequently lead to a positive test in a blue-and-gold macaw, a Hahn's macaw and an orange-winged Amazon. Petland tested birds at three of its stores, including two in Illinois, but the only ill birds were found at the Shakopee location. All birds were removed from the Shakopee store Dec. 24 to undergo a 45-day antibiotic treatment, Washburn said.

Petland continues to believe Preferred Birds is "great source" of birds, because of its immediate response to this situation, Washburn said.

Both Petsmart and Petland issued letters to people who purchased birds at the affected stores. Because the Shakopee store is new, however, it did not have complete records for all of its customers, Washburn said. Local media interviews and a Minnesota Health Department press release did alert additional bird owners to the situation, and they called the store directly, Washburn said.

Psittacosis can be deadly in both parrots and humans but is generally treatable by a dose of antibiotics.

"Psittacosis is certainly a public health concern," said veterinarian Feldman, but she added that it is treatable and not that uncommon. "There's probably a certain amount of psittacosis in pet stores at any given time. The primary message out to the public is that if someone has had contact with a pet bird and then develops respiratory symptoms, they should seek medical help."

Psittacosis symptoms, however, also often look like the flu or any other wintertime illness with fever, headaches, nausea and fatigue. Infected birds might appear depressed or lethargic. They might eat and groom less or exhibit nasal discharge, breathing difficulties and watery droppings or weight loss. It spreads when a person or bird inhales or ingests contaminated fecal dust or matter.

Florida's Stanek recommended cleaning cages regularly, including removing soiled cage liners daily to prevent dried fecal matter buildup. She suggested using bleach to disinfect perches and the cage, but only when the birds are removed and when done so in a well-ventilated area. All materials should be thoroughly rinsed and dried before returning the bird to the cage, she said.

"This is a bacteria that is relatively common in birds, particularly psittacine birds, the parrots," Stanek said. "It is readily treatable with antibiotics."