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Psittacosis in Your Pet Bird

Psittacosis (Chlamydiosis, ornithosis, parrot fever) is the disease caused by a bacterium called Chlamydia psittaci. Psittacosis is commonly diagnosed in our pet bird species, most frequently seen in cockatiels, galahs and budgies. We recommend quarantine and testing of ALL new birds before being introduced to your other birds. A quality, balanced diet, good hygiene, ventilation, disinfection, and a general health check every 6-12 months is recommended to keep on top of any current or developing health concerns in your pet bird.

Clinical signs

This bacteria can cause a variety of clinical signs in parrots:

- sneezing
- discharge or swelling around the eyes and nose
- diarrhoea, lime-green urates
- reduced appetite
- weight loss
- fluffed up and,
- occasionally no signs at all.

Some birds who are diagnosed with psittacosis may never show signs of disease (carrier state), or may appear healthy until times of emotional or physiological stress. Stressors can include moving house, a heavy moult, other illness, reproduction, a diet change, the introduction of new people or animals to the household.

Transmission

A naive bird (that has never been exposed to this bacteria) may contract disease in a pet shop, an aviary, from its' parents, or when placed in contact with another bird (who is a carrier) in a new home.

The bacteria is shed intermittently, most frequently when the bird is stressed or ill. The carrier state may be lifelong. Psittacosis is spread from droplets when the bird sneezes, or via feather dander (powder down) and faeces that is ingested or inhaled from the air, therefore birds in separate cages in close proximity can spread the disease.

In rare situations, the disease can be transmitted to humans in the same way. Humans that are susceptible to Chlamydia psittaci infection are those who may be immunosuppressed - pregnant women, people with respiratory disease, transplant patients, people on immunosuppressive medications, HIV patients, the very young, and the very old. In people, the disease often presents as a chronic cough, headache, fever, chills, weakness, fatigue and muscular aches, and in serious cases can lead to pneumonia. People affected have described it as “a flu that won’t go away”.

Diagnosis

Chlamydia infection can be hard to detect and we use three tests to help us diagnose it: antigen test, antibody testing and an auxiliary test.

Infection is ideally detected with an antigen test (presence of the organism in the body) by taking swabs from the eye, choana, and cloaca or a blood test and sent away to an external company for a molecular test called PCR. This antigen test is highly specific and accurate during infection, so when a positive result is obtained, this confirms your bird has the infection.

We can also look for antibodies produced by the bird's immune system in response to exposure to the bacteria. These are performed at Brighton Vet Surgery as an "in-house" test. It is best to collect blood for this test at least 2 weeks after the last possible exposure to the disease (eg. 2 weeks after an escaped bird has returned home). A positive test does not mean your bird is infected, but if they are sick and we get a positive antibody test, we often treat the disease based on this evidence.

We typically also take a drop of blood and perform an estimated white blood cell count in house. An elevated white blood cell count supports infection. Organ function testing may also be performed to assess for underlying disease (eg liver dysfunction, kidney disease etc).

Treatment

Psittacosis is a treatable disease, and if your pet is tested positive on the antigen test then treatment is usually recommended for the rest of your flock that have shared the same airspace with the infected individual. Positive birds should be isolated during the beginning of treatment, as they may continue to shed the bacteria, and infect other flock mates. Effective treatment for psittacosis needs to be continued for 45 days, and the method of treatment varies depending on the individual situation. Following infection, the antibody blood test may be used at intervals until such time as the antibody level is reduced to a very low level or no antibodies are detected and the bird has shown no repeated signs of illness.

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