

Happy and Healthy:

Your pet bird and you



There are many health benefits to pets but any animal can also carry germs that can make people sick. Luckily, there are simple things you can do to keep you and your family healthy.

Pet birds, like all other animals and humans, can carry germs in their digestive system (which includes everything from the mouth to the stomach to the intestines) and then pass those germs in their feces (droppings).

Germs, like *Salmonella* bacteria, may be present in the droppings of pet birds without making the bird sick or causing any symptoms. If these germs accidentally get into a person's mouth, which may happen when a person touches the droppings (or the animal) and later touches his or her mouth or prepares food without washing his or her hands first, the person may become ill.

Symptoms in people may include diarrhea, fever, nausea, vomiting, and abdominal cramps. Children are especially at risk for becoming infected because they are more likely to put their hands in their mouths after handling a pet. Although anyone can become ill from these germs, not everyone who gets exposed to these germs will become sick. Young children, the elderly, pregnant women, and people with weakened immune systems are more likely to become sick and may develop more serious illness.



What other germs can be spread by pet birds?

Another germ, which is most often associated with cockatiels, parakeets, parrots and macaws, is the bacteria *Chlamydophila psittaci*. People become infected with this germ when they breathe in dust that has dried bird feces or dried respiratory secretions from infected birds in it. People may also get ill if they don't wash their hands well after touching the feathers of sick birds or if they touch their mouths to the birds' beaks. As with *Salmonella*, animals infected with this germ may look and be healthy, so you cannot tell if an animal is carrying the germ just by looking at it. Once infected, some people develop a disease called psittacosis (pronounced, SIT-A-KO-SIS).

Symptoms of psittacosis in people include fever, chills, headache, fatigue and a dry cough. Not everyone who is exposed will become sick. But many people who are infected develop pneumonia. Older people tend to develop more serious disease, especially if they are not treated.

Is there anything else?

Anyone with allergies could also be allergic to birds. Even people without other allergies could be bothered by bird feathers and dander. Symptoms could range from a stuffy nose to serious breathing difficulties such as asthma.



Here are a few simple things that can make having a pet bird safe and fun:



- **Always wash your hands with soap and water immediately after handling pet birds, their cage, food dishes or toys, or their droppings;** use waterless, alcohol-based gels or hand rubs if soap is not available.
- Clean bird cages regularly and remove soiled items from the cage between cleanings.
- Always clean the cage outside or in a well-ventilated area. Do not clean it in the kitchen sink or anywhere else food is stored or handled.
- Closely supervise young children, especially those less than five years old, when cleaning cages, and make sure they wash their hands immediately after handling birds or bird cages.
- Do not kiss pet birds or hold them close to your face.
- Have your pet seen regularly by your veterinarian and contact your veterinarian if your pet bird shows signs of illness between visits.
- Do not allow pet birds to come into contact with wild birds or their droppings.
- Because pregnant women, persons with weakened immune systems, the elderly and young children (those less than 5 years old) are at higher risk for more serious illness, birds should be not be handled and cared for by an individual who falls in one of these categories.

For more information about handling pets safely, see:

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website, “Healthy Pets Healthy People” at <http://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/index.htm>.
- The Massachusetts Department of Public Health website at <http://www.mass.gov/dph/epi> or call the Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at 617-983-6800 or toll free at 1-888-658-2850.
- Or call your veterinarian.

