

Birds in Schools

Revised 4/25/2011

The primary zoonotic disease concern with pet birds in schools is known as psittacosis. Psittacosis can cause respiratory disease in humans. From 1998 to 2004, only 146 human cases of psittacosis were reported to health authorities in the United States; therefore the disease is rarely reported. This disease causes influenza-like symptoms and is usually characterized by a non-productive cough and fever, but can progress to pneumonia. The disease can be treated with antibiotics; treatment is routinely successful.

Infected birds shed the bacteria through feces and nasal discharges. Humans become infected from exposure to these materials, or from direct exposure to infected birds; therefore the most likely people to be exposed are those responsible for maintaining, cleaning and feeding birds on a regular basis. The time from exposure to onset of illness is usually five to 14 days, however longer periods of time have been reported.

It is very common for pet birds to be displayed in a classroom environment, yet reports of transmission of this disease to students remain infrequent and sporadic. Therefore the probability of transmission of the disease to students is low, unless the students have prolonged direct contact with the bird, or its secretions and cage dander. Proper follow-up should ensure successful resolution of any situation where a bird becomes ill.

The Louisiana Office of Public Health (LA OPH) recommends that schools and school health officials adhere to the following recommendations:

GUIDELINES FOR BIRDS AS PETS IN SCHOOLS (proposed):

1. The school's administration must be aware of the presence of birds in schools and routinely monitor the health status of the animals.
2. Schools should have a signed certificate from a veterinarian certifying the bird(s) is/are free from disease including psittacosis, coccidiosis, and giardiasis (in stool), and free of lice. This examination should be completed prior to acceptance of the bird's admission to the facility and must be repeated annually. Examinations must include the screening of birds for infection with *Chlamydophila psittaci*, the agent of psittacosis. Specific screening protocols should be established in consultation with a veterinarian. Information on testing or screening protocols is available in the most recent *Compendium of Measures to Control Chlamydophila psittaci Infection Among Humans (Psittacosis), and Pet Birds (Avian Chlamydiosis)*, published by the National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians (<http://www.nasphv.org>).
3. The school should retain all health certificates, an individual bird's illness and treatment record, and any random health testing results.
4. The school should have the birds examined whenever their health is in question. Any bird showing signs of illness should be removed from the classroom, or any other room where students or non-animal care staff are located.

5. Any person that handles a bird, or bird caging should thoroughly wash, or sanitize his or her hands immediately after contact.

6. The school should have written policies/procedures governing the care and feeding of the bird(s), and a monitoring system to ensure the policies/procedures are carried out. At a minimum these policies should contain the following items:

- a.) Birds should never be placed by a window as draft or sunlight can be detrimental to them
- b.) Observe for nail and beak length to see if they need trimming.
- c.) Never position a bird over a heater.
- d.) Do not use string or other material to fasten the doors of bird cages.
- e.) Feed only foods approved for consumption by the specific avian species or foods approved by a licensed veterinarian.
- f.) If water is spilled on the bottom of the cage, the paper should be changed and the cage bottom should be dried.
- g.) Procedures for sand and water bath for bird bathing.
- h.) If birds get out of the cage, the most effective way to catch an “escaped bird” is to use a towel to cover and trap the bird. This procedure tends to be less stressful for the bird, and facilitates control of the animal.
- i.) Always spray sinks with disinfectant following cage cleaning procedures.
- j.) Always wipe up water, and/or seed following feeding and cleaning procedures.
- k.) Plants should never be placed near bird cages since many house plants are toxic.
- l.) Bird food should be stored in sealed containers such as glass jars, etc.
- m.) Birds must be kept in cages of sufficient size; overcrowding should be avoided.

7. Any incident of injury to, or from a bird (includes scratches and bites) should be reported to the teacher and/or administrator responsible for the school’s pet program.

8. Suggested daily husbandry routine:

- a.) All birds should receive fresh water and food daily.
- b.) Paper should be changed daily.
- c.) Check for illness daily.
- d.) Isolate the sick bird, notify the school administration, consult a veterinarian and administer appropriate medication as ordered.
- e.) Check and have birds nails clipped as needed.
- f.) Give vegetables and/or vitamin supplements or seed with vitamins and vegetables weekly or as recommended by the veterinarian.
- g.) Provide birds with a cuttle bone.

9. Suggested weekly husbandry routine

- a.) All cages should be kept clean and in good repair. Strings or similar materials should not be used to fasten the door of the bird cage.
- b.) At a minimum of every seven days or more often if needed, the cages should be thoroughly cleaned as follows:
 - i. Bottom of cage scrubbed with hot water.
 - ii. Perches scraped and scrubbed
 - iii. Food and water containers scrubbed.

10. Bird Handlers: The school should have several staff members assigned to feed and care for the birds, including cleaning the cages. If students participate, they should be supervised by teachers, or administrative caretakers. STUDENTS less than six years of age should never handle the birds, or caging. Older students should be supervised and should be instructed to thoroughly wash, or sanitize their hands immediately after contact.

11. Breeding Birds (may be seen in agricultural, veterinary or science courses, projects, or school organizations)

- a.) Any breeding birds should also be monitored.
- b.) Brothers and sisters should be separated to prevent breeding.
- c.) Follow veterinarian's recommendations on the age to breed birds.

12. Should a bird be diagnosed as being infected with *Chlamydophila psittaci*, the causative agent of psittacosis, or any other zoonotic disease, the bird should be immediately removed from the school. The parents or guardians of any children reporting an onset of influenza symptoms, especially when these symptoms are accompanied by cough and fever during a period that a bird diagnosed with psittacosis was present in a classroom, or during a period up to 30 days after removal of the sick bird from the premises, should inform their physician of potential contact with a bird that was infected with *Chlamydophila psittaci* or psittacosis. The same procedure should be employed by any faculty or staff that was exposed.

13. The LA OPH Infectious Disease Epidemiology Section (IDES), and the State Public Health Veterinarian [(504) 568-8313 or (800) 256-2748] are available to provide information on human psittacosis, including procedures regarding testing and control. Information on psittacosis is also available in the Epidemiology Manual section <http://www.dhh.louisiana.gov/offices/page.asp?id=249&detail=6481> of the OPH IDES website, <http://www.infectiousdisease.dhh.louisiana.gov>. Additional information on psittacosis control in birds is available by clicking on "Psittacosis Compendium and chlamydiosis materials" on the NASPHV website, <http://www.nasphv.org>. The "Psittacosis Compendium" is available for download.

14. Please be advised that psittacosis is reportable to both the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry (LDAF), and the LA OPH. Please report any suspect or confirmed cases in birds to the State Veterinarian, Office of Animal Health Services, LDAF (225) 925-3980 (phone), (225)237-5555 (fax).