

Pigeon Diseases

Pigeons often make nests in buildings and rapidly reproduce. Breeding occurs throughout the year, usually taking place between March and July. Contact with pigeon droppings may pose a health risk. Three human diseases are known to be associated with pigeon droppings: histoplasmosis, cryptococcosis, and psittacosis.

Histoplasmosis

Histoplasmosis is a disease caused by a fungus, which grows in pigeon droppings. It also grows in soils and is found throughout the world. When cleaning droppings a person may breathe in some of the fungus, which in cases of high exposure can cause infection. Common activities, such as cleaning off windowsills, will not result in high exposures. Symptoms of histoplasmosis begin to appear about 10 days after initial infection and include fatigue, fever, and chest pains. Most people, however, do not show any symptoms. Those with compromised immune systems such as cancer patients or people living with HIV/AIDS are generally more at risk of developing histoplasmosis.

Cryptococcosis

Cryptococcosis is another fungal disease associated with pigeon droppings and also grows in soils throughout the world. It is very unlikely that healthy people will become infected even at high levels of exposure. A major risk factor for infection is a compromised immune system. Researchers at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx found that 70% of urban children have been exposed to Cryptococcosis.

Psittacosis

Psittacosis (also known as ornithosis or parrot fever) is a rare infectious disease that mainly affects parrots and parrot-like birds such as cockatiels, and parakeets, but may also affect other birds, such as pigeons. When bird droppings dry and become airborne people may inhale them and get sick.

In humans, this bacterial disease is characterized by: fatigue, fever, headache, rash, chills, and sometimes pneumonia. Symptoms develop about 10 days after exposure. Psittacosis can be treated with a common antibiotic.

Cleaning Up Pigeon Droppings

Protecting the health of both workers who clean up pigeon droppings and the general public is important.

Cleaning Droppings

Before any extensive clean-up measures are taken - e.g., removing accumulations inside an air shaft - workers should be informed of the possible health risks involved, particularly those with weakened immune systems. Even though histoplasmosis, cryptococcosis, and psittacosis pose minor public health threats, they can be further minimized if safety measures are taken. Wearing protective clothing like disposable coveralls, boots, gloves, and respirators can be used for protection.

If a high-powered water hose is used to strip off dried droppings, dust control measures such as containing the area with plastic sheeting, should be taken. Wetting down the work area will prevent inhalation, reduce the risk of infection and will also prevent the spread of dust outside the work area. Those with a compromised immune system such as people living with HIV/AIDS or cancer patients should not be directly involved in the removal of the droppings. Always wash hands and any exposed skin before eating or drinking and when finished with work.

Several alternatives to using a high-powered water hose exist. One such alternative includes soaking the droppings with water and then shoveling it. The wet material should be collected in heavy-duty plastic bags or another type of secure container and discarded with the regular trash.

Once the structures are cleaned they should have bird control products installed to prevent further accumulation of droppings.

Other Health Issues

Bed Bugs

Bed bugs (*Cimex lectularius*) are becoming a major pest issue in the USA. Pigeons, starlings and house sparrows are known to carry bed bugs.

West Nile Virus

West Nile virus can be vectored from birds to humans by mosquito bites. This virus can cause serious, life-altering and even fatal disease.

E. coli O157:H7

The organism can be found on most cattle farms, and it is commonly found in petting zoos and can live in the intestines of healthy cattle, deer, goats, and sheep. It is transferred by birds feeding around cattle droppings and passed on by humans coming into contact with the contaminated bird droppings.

Salmonellosis

Salmonellosis (sal-mohn-el-OH-sis) is a bacterial disease caused by the bacterium *Salmonella*. Many different kinds of *Salmonella* can make people sick. Most people have diarrhea, fever, and stomach pain that start 1 to 3 days after they get infected. Birds (including pet birds), can pass *Salmonella* in their feces.

St. Louis encephalitis virus

Mosquitoes become infected by feeding on birds infected with the St. Louis encephalitis virus. Infected mosquitoes then transmit the St. Louis encephalitis virus to humans and animals during the feeding process. The St. Louis encephalitis virus grows both in the infected mosquito and the infected bird, but does not make either one sick. In humans mild infections occur without apparent symptoms other than fever with headache. More severe infection is marked by headache, high fever, neck stiffness, stupor, disorientation, coma, tremors, occasional convulsions (especially in infants) and spastic (but rarely flaccid) paralysis

Bird Mites

Bird mites are parasitic mites from birds. The Mites are too small to be easily seen without magnification. Symptoms include pinprick bites, small reddened bumps, often intense itching with or without lesions, and a crawling sensation anywhere on the body. The intense itching and irritation on the skin is due to the mite's saliva. When a large area is covered with bites it will resemble a rash in appearance, and it is often mistaken for scabies.