

Dear Dr. Wise: After an evening with friends and their delightful new parrot, we decided that such a bird might be the ideal pet for us since we can't have a dog or cat in our apartment. I've heard, however, that parrots have a disease that can be passed to humans. What can you tell us about this? Are parrots safe pets?

Answer: I can understand your concern because psittacosis, the problem in question, is one of the few diseases that can be transmitted from pets to people. Sometimes called parrot fever, the disease is only moderately common and should not frighten you from having a parrot in your home. Psittacosis, however, is a public health issue and any cases must be reported to health officials.

The disease is due to micro-organisms called Chlamydia psittaci which are transmitted from the infected bird through its intestinal tract in droppings or through the respiratory tract in nasal discharges. The organisms cannot jump, hop or fly, and move instead from birds to people or other birds in food, water or droplets in the air or dust.

Any bird can contract psittacosis, but those in the parrot family are particularly susceptible because of their kissing and cooing and the way they mouth-feed their young. Parrots, which are used to a warmer climate, chill easily if near a draft and are prone to respiratory problems, so do not be scared of parrot fever every time the bird has a runny nose or diarrhea.

Symptoms of the disease in parrots range from the sudden death of an apparently healthy bird to a variety of chronic illness signs. The bird may develop droopy posture, ruffled feathers, sleepy eyes, decreased appetite, nose and eye discharge and a watery, greenish diarrhea. The symptoms in humans also vary from mild flu-type illness to a more severe fever and atypical pneumonia.

The best protection against psittacosis is to buy a healthy bird. Find a reputable source. You may want to check with friends who own birds or visit pet stores and observe the birds yourself. Look for a clean environment where birds appear healthy and not too crowded. You may want to question the store owners to be assured that they are aware of the potential problem of psittacosis and take measures to guard against disease. Some breeders and store owners routinely give tetracycline to any bird whose background is unknown. The antibiotic is very effective.

With the information I've given you, you should be able to select a healthy bird that will live a long and healthy life. Just keep in mind that in very rare cases, a bird may be a carrier and exhibit no symptoms of disease until it has been home for some time. Also be sure to call your veterinarian at the first sign of potential problems with your pet.

If you have any question about your pet, write to Dr. Wise, Indiana Veterinary Medical Association, 201 S. Capitol Ave. Ste. 405, Indianapolis, IN 46225, or [www.invma.org](http://www.invma.org).

