



## PIGEON-RELATED DISEASES

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### **Background**

Pigeons are common to Los Angeles County. They often make nests on buildings and rapidly reproduce. Breeding occurs throughout the year, usually taking place between March and July. Limited contact with pigeon droppings may pose a small health risk, and is usually associated with cleaning of pigeon droppings.

Three human diseases are known to be associated with pigeon droppings: histoplasmosis, cryptococcus, and psittacosis.

*Histoplasmosis* is a disease caused by a fungus which can grow in pigeon droppings. It also grows in soils and is found throughout the world. When clearing droppings, a person may breathe in some of the fungus. In cases of high exposure, this can cause infection. Common activities, such as cleaning off windowsills, will not result in high exposures. The disease cannot be transmitted from person to person. Symptoms 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 are generally more at risk. Learn more about the disease by referring to the United States Centers for Disease Control (CDC) website <https://www.cdc.gov/histoplasmosis/about/>

*Cryptococcus* 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. According to the CDC, nearly 85 percent of cryptococcus patients are HIV-positive. Learn more about the disease by referring to the CDC website <https://www.cdc.gov/cryptococcosis/about/>

*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 pigeons. When bird droppings dry and disturbed particles 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. Since 1996, fewer than 50 confirmed cases have been reported in the United States annually. According to the CDC, about 70% of infected people had contact with infected pet birds. Those at greatest risk include bird owners, pet shop employees, veterinarians, and people with compromised immune systems. Person-to-person cases are rare, for more information, refer to the website <https://www.cdc.gov/psittacosis/about/>.

## **Prevention Practices**

*Reduce direct contact with droppings.* Some simple precautions can be taken to reduce contact with droppings. Wear disposable gloves, and clothes that can be washed.

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

### General Public

- ✓ Routine cleaning of droppings (e.g. from windowsills) does not pose a serious health risk to most people.
- ✓ Those with compromised immune systems, such as HIV/AIDS or cancer patients, should not be directly involved in the removal of the droppings.
- ✓ Wear disposable gloves during the cleaning process.
- ✓ Always wash hands and any exposed skin before eating or drinking and when finished.

### Workers

- ✓ Before any extensive clean-up measures are taken, workers should be informed of the possible health risks involved, particularly those with weakened immune systems if they must be involved.
- ✓ Recommended NIOSH PPE protection during high-risk activities—such as cleaning bird cages, handling infected birds, or performing necropsies—includes an N95 or higher-efficiency respirator, gloves, protective clothing (smock/coveralls), eye protection, and a disposable hat/shoe covers. Wet cleaning methods are required to prevent aerosolization. Wetting down the work area will prevent inhalation, reduce the risk of infection, and will also prevent the spread of dust.
- ✓ If a high-powered water hose is used to strip off dried droppings, dust control measures, such as first containing the area with plastic sheeting, should be taken.
- ✓ Another method is to soak the droppings with water and then shovel them up. 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 be regularly washed to prevent further accumulation of droppings.
- ✓ Always wash hands and any exposed skin before eating or drinking and when finished with work.

## **More Information**

For more information about the health effects of pigeon-related diseases, call your doctor. If you have additional questions regarding the health effects of the removal of pigeon droppings, you may contact National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) at 1(800) CDC-INFO, or for more information on specific diseases can be found at the CDC website, <http://www.cdc.gov>.