

# IDRS Infectious Disease Reporting System

Disease Reporting 24 Hours a Day

Columbus Public Health and Franklin County Public Health

## HISTOPLASMOSIS

Histoplasmosis is a disease caused by the fungus *Histoplasma capsulatum*. Most people with histoplasmosis have no symptoms. However, in some people, histoplasma can cause lung disease and infections affecting a number of organs. It can be fatal if untreated.

### Symptoms

If symptoms occur, they start within 3 to 17 days after exposure (10 days on average) and include:

- Fever which lasts from days to weeks with a general sick feeling
- Rash and joint pain
- Chest pain and a dry or nonproductive cough.
- In people with a weakened immune system, the fungus can cause a variety of problems:
  - Severe pneumonia
  - Chronic (long term) infection of the lungs that may go on for years
  - Infection of multiple organs in the body (this form is fatal unless treated)
- If a health care provider takes a chest x-ray, histoplasmosis may look like tuberculosis.

### Transmission

- *H. capsulatum* grows in soil and areas contaminated with dry bat or bird droppings. The fungus can travel through the air when contaminated soil is disturbed. Breathing the germs causes infection.
- You cannot get Histoplasmosis directly from a bird or from fresh bird droppings.
- Histoplasmosis is not contagious; it cannot be transmitted directly from person to person.
- *H. capsulatum* is very common in Ohio soil. Probably about 1/3 of Ohioans have been exposed at some time during their life. Most people will not remember this because they may not have felt sick from it.

### Treatment

- Mild disease usually resolves without treatment. Most people never feel sick at all.
- Infants, young children, older adults, and those with chronic lung disease are more likely to have serious illness from histoplasmosis. This may include pneumonia and long term lung infections. Antifungal medications are used to treat these cases.
- People with cancer or AIDS are most likely to get the most severe form, where multiple organs are infected. People with this form will die without treatment.
- If someone has been infected before, they can still get histoplasmosis again, but in a milder form.

### Prevention

- Avoid areas that may harbor the fungus: caves, old chicken coops, dusty areas, anywhere where birds or bats roost, and places that have accumulations of bird or bat droppings.
- If you need to work in these areas, protect yourself by wearing a face mask capable of filtering out particles larger than 1 millimicron.
- If you work in these environments as part of your job, talk with your employer about taking these safety precautions to protect yourself.

All information is general in nature and is not intended to be used as a substitute for appropriate professional advice.



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