Histoplasmosis

Histoplasmosis is sometimes called Darling’s disease. It is caused by a fungus.

The fungus lives in dirt, especially dirt mixed with bird or bat droppings. The fungus usually causes a short-term lung infection. The disease can spread to other parts of the body (disseminated histoplasmosis). That form can be fatal.

Even mild histoplasmosis can lead to a serious eye disease that can cause blindness. This disease is called ocular histoplasmosis syndrome.

Histoplasmosis can cause serious complications. These include inflammation of the sac that covers the heart (pericarditis) and the joints (arthritis). It can also lead to scarring in the chest that traps lymph nodes (organ important for the functioning of the immune system), blood vessels or organs inside the chest. This is called fibrosing mediastinitis. It can harm the heart or the esophagus. (The esophagus carries food from the mouth to the stomach.) It can also cause the lymph nodes to swell and press on the esophagus or the blood vessels going to and from the lungs. This is called mediastinal granuloma.

Symptoms of Histoplasmosis

There are a lot of symptoms, some which you may not notice even though the condition can be fatal.

When only the lungs are affected, the signs show up 5-18 days after being exposed to the fungus. They include tiredness, fever, chills, chest pains and a dry cough.

When the lung infection is ongoing, histoplasmosis is like tuberculosis. This form appears mostly in people who already have lung disease. It can develop over months or even years.

If disseminated histoplasmosis is not treated it can lead to death. It can also affect all of the body’s organs, the blood and the linings of the brain. Sores appear in the mouth or the digestive tract. Other signs are fever, headache, and neck stiffness or joint pain. There may also be sores, lumps or rashes on the skin.

Causes of Histoplasmosis

People get histoplasmosis when they breathe in dust that has the fungus. It cannot be spread from person to person. If plants fed with bat droppings are burned, the smoke can spread the disease.

The fungus produces lasting spores. They can live in the environment for a long time. When the spores get into the lungs, they turn into yeast. The yeast is what causes the disease.

Risk Factors for Histoplasmosis

Anyone can get histoplasmosis. Men are more likely to develop the chronic, lung infection form, especially if they already have chronic lung disease.

The widespread form occurs mostly in people with weak immune systems. This includes babies, children, people with cancer and people with HIV.

Preventing Histoplasmosis

To prevent getting the disease you can:

• Avoid areas that have a lot of dust or droppings where the fungus might live. These
include old chicken houses, areas where starlings and blackbirds roost and caves (or other areas) where bats live. If you think dirt might have the fungus, spray it with water before handling it.

- When gardening or working in high-risk areas, cover your mouth and nose with a dust mask. It is a good idea to wear clothing that can be thrown away afterward.

**Diagnosing Histoplasmosis**

A doctor can take samples of blood, lung tissue, saliva (sputum), bone marrow or fluid from around the brain. These will be sent to a lab where they will try to grow a sample of the fungus. (This is called a culture.)

Another test looks for signs of a specific protein that the body makes to fight histoplasmosis infection. This test can be done on samples of blood, urine or spinal fluid.

An X-ray can be taken to show patterns in the lungs.

**Treating Histoplasmosis**

Without treatment, widespread histoplasmosis is very fatal. However, with treatment, survival is most likely.

When the condition is either severe, widespread or chronic, people are given fungus-killing drugs.

People with mild forms of the disease usually get better on their own.

A person with HIV who gets histoplasmosis is usually treated with prescription drugs.

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**For more information:**

Contact your Registered Nurse Care Manager, or call Positive Healthcare’s nurse advice line at: (800) 832-0778.