



Histoplasmosis

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

The fungus lives in dirt mixed with bird or bat poop. This fungus can cause many problems. It can cause the sac that covers the heart and the joints to swell. It can scar the area in the chest that holds the lymph nodes, blood vessels or organs. 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 that run to and from the lungs.

The fungus can cause a short-term lung infection. The disease can spread to other parts of the body. It can be fatal if it spreads outside the lungs. Even mild histoplasmosis can lead to a severe eye disease that can cause blindness.

Symptoms

There are a lot of symptoms when this fungus is in your body. If you do not notice the signs, the disease can be fatal.

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

When the lung infection goes on for a while, it is like tuberculosis. This form appears mostly in people who have had lung disease before. It can build up over months or even years.

If histoplasmosis is not treated it can lead to death. It can also affect all of the body's organs, the blood and the outer layer 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

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 spores of this fungus last a long time. They can live in the ground for a long time. When the spores get into the lungs, they turn into yeast. The yeast is what causes the disease.

Risk Factors

Anyone can get histoplasmosis. Men are more likely to have the form of chronic, lung infection if they have had chronic lung disease in the past.

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

How to Know You Have Histoplasmosis

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

Another test looks for signs of a certain protein that the body makes to fight this 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.

Treatment

Without treatment, widespread histoplasmosis is fatal. With treatment the chance you will survive is high. People with HIV are often treated to kill the fungus.

Prevention

To prevent this disease you can:

- Avoid areas that have a lot of dust or poop 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 you handle it.
- When you garden or work in high-risk areas, cover your mouth and nose with a dust mask. It is a good idea to wear clothes that can be thrown away when you are done.

For more information

Contact your Registered Nurse Care Manager, or call Positive Healthcare's Nurse Advice Line at: (800) 797-1717.

