



PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

**Boston Public Health Commission
Communicable Disease Control Division
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Pigeons **(related diseases)**

Pigeons are common in many cities, including Boston. They often nest in buildings and can excrete a great amount of droppings. A small health risk can be associated with pigeon contact. Three human diseases, histoplasmosis, cryptococcosis and psittacosis are linked to pigeon droppings.

Histoplasmosis

A fungus that grows in bird droppings and soil causes histoplasmosis, a disease that affects the lungs. When cleaning a significant amount of bird droppings a person can breathe in the fungus, which in some cases can cause infection. Common activities, such as cleaning off windowsills, will not usually result in high-risk exposure. Symptoms usually begin 1 to 3 weeks after infected and include fatigue, fever, cough and chest pain. Most people exposed to the fungus do not have symptoms; however, those with compromised immune systems are at highest risk of developing illness. The disease is not transmitted from person to person. In severe cases, medication can be used to treat infection; however, most people will recover on their own.

Cryptococcosis

Cryptococcosis is a fungal disease that affects the lungs and is associated with pigeon droppings and soil. Healthy people do not usually become infected, even at high levels of exposure. A compromised immune system is a high risk factor for infection.

Psittacosis

Psittacosis (parrot fever) is a rare disease that mainly affects parrots and parrot-like birds such as cockatiels, but can also affect other birds, such as pigeons. When bird droppings dry and become airborne people can inhale the fungus and become sick. In humans, symptoms include; dry cough, fever, headache, muscle ache, chills and sometimes pneumonia. Symptoms usually develop 7-14 days after exposure. Those at greatest risk include bird owners, pet shop employees, veterinarians and people with compromised immune systems. Psittacosis can be treated and is not transmitted from person to person.

Should I feed pigeons?

People should not feed pigeons because human food lacks the necessary nutrients for bird health. In addition, feeding attracts pigeons into an area that could cause further harm to both the bird and human. Regular feeding of pigeons makes them dependent on humans for food and destroys their natural ability to find food.

How should I clean up pigeon droppings?

Routine cleaning of droppings (e.g., from windowsills) does not pose a serious health risk to most people. Some simple precautions should be taken to further reduce direct contact with droppings, such as wearing disposable gloves and washing clothes after contact with droppings. Dry droppings should be wet down before scraping, as you want to avoid inhaling the dropping "dust." Those working in enclosed areas with risk of inhaling pigeon droppings should wear a mask to protect themselves from airborne exposure to droppings.

**For more information, please contact
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