

Fact Sheet

What is histoplasmosis?

A fungus called *Histoplasma capsulatum* causes histoplasmosis. The fungus is found in the soil, often in areas where bird and bat droppings are located. The bird droppings do not contain histoplasmosis, but help provide nutrients for the fungus already in the soil to grow, however, bat droppings may contain histoplasmosis. In the U.S., most cases are found along the Ohio and Mississippi River Valleys.

What are the symptoms of histoplasmosis?

Most people will have no symptoms. Some people with histoplasmosis will have a fever, chest pains, and a dry or non-productive cough. A health care provider may use a chest x-ray to help diagnose histoplasmosis. Occasionally people will have symptoms of histoplasmosis for a long time if not treated.

There are five different kinds of histoplasmosis illness:

- *Asymptomatic form*- an infected person has no symptoms. This type of infection goes away without treatment.
- *Acute benign respiratory form*- flu-like symptoms that vary from a mild respiratory illness to a short term illness with general tiredness, fever, chills, headache, muscle aches, chest pains and non-productive cough. This type of infection typically resolves without treatment.
- *Acute disseminated form*- symptoms occur in many parts of the body and may include a fever, vomiting or diarrhea, and enlarged lymph nodes and or spleen. Without treatment this form of histoplasmosis illness may be fatal. This kind of histoplasmosis illness usually occurs in infants, young children, and immune compromised people. Treatment is typically needed for this form.
- *Chronic disseminated form*- symptoms may come and go and last a long time and may include a fever, weight loss, weakness, enlarged liver and spleen, and mild blood abnormalities. Other areas of the body may be affected, including the heart and the covering of the brain or spinal cord. Ulcers of the mouth, larynx, stomach or bowel may also occur. This form usually develops over 10-11 months and needs treatment to prevent serious complications. This form typically occurs in people who are severely immuno-compromised, such as those receiving chemotherapy for cancer.
- *Chronic pulmonary form*- symptoms may include night sweats, loss of weight, loss of appetite and a chronic cough lasting longer than three weeks. This form occurs most often in middle-aged and elderly men with other lung diseases. Treatment may be needed for this form.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually occur within 3-17 days after exposure. Many histoplasmosis infections are not identified; since people who have histoplasmosis either have no symptoms or such mild illness that medical care is not needed.

How is histoplasmosis spread?

The fungus is found in the soil and bat droppings. People get histoplasmosis when soil or bat droppings are disturbed, large amounts of dust is created allowing the fungus to get into the air. People then breathe in the fungus. Once the fungus gets inside a person's body it can start growing and cause sickness. The disease cannot be spread from one person to another.

Who gets histoplasmosis?

Anyone can be infected but most who are infected will not become sick. It is estimated that up to 50% of Iowans have already been exposed to histoplasmosis.

What is the treatment for this illness?

Anti-fungal medications are used, and the treatment may last several weeks to months. Mild cases usually do not need treatment. People who have had histoplasmosis illness may be protected from getting histoplasmosis again.

Do infected people need to be excluded from school, work, or child care?

No, the disease cannot be spread from one person to another.

What can be done to help prevent the spread of this fungus?

If soil that may be contaminated with bird droppings or bat droppings will be disturbed, precautions should be taken such as wearing a mask, and spraying the area with water or oil before disturbing the soil.

If you have questions regarding any of the above symptoms contact your healthcare provider or the Iowa Department of Public Health at (866) 923-1089.