

HISTOPLASMOSIS: Employers and Workers

Histoplasmosis is a treatable infection caused by the *Histoplasma* fungus. This fungus is so small it cannot be seen by the human eye. Many people with histoplasmosis will not feel sick, but some can become very sick or even die. People with a weakened immune system or a chronic illness are more likely to get sick.

How is it spread?

- *Histoplasma* is spread in debris where bird or bat droppings have accumulated. People get histoplasmosis by breathing tiny particles released into the air when dirt or droppings are disturbed.
- *Histoplasma* grows throughout Wisconsin. It's most often found in dirt that wasn't moved for a long time, especially in places where bird and bat droppings accumulate, like caves, attics, or bridges.
- Histoplasmosis cannot spread from person-to-person.



The best of intentions can lead to histoplasmosis.

If you are cleaning up bird or bat droppings that have been undisturbed for a year or more, it's crucial to take precautions.

Bird droppings:



Bat droppings:



What types of workers might be at risk?

Jobs that involve digging or moving dirt where bird and bat droppings accumulate have a higher risk of histoplasmosis. Examples include people who work with:

- Cleanup of accumulated bird or bat droppings (scraping from bridges, shoveling from buildings).
- Caves or other partially enclosed spaces where bird or bat droppings may be present.
- Dirt (digging, moving, excavating).
- Plant debris (handling fallen trees, landscaping).
- Demolition, construction, or renovation projects.

Occupations with risk for histoplasmosis include: bridge inspectors or painters, chimney cleaners, construction workers, demolition workers, farmers, gardeners, heating and air conditioning service workers, microbiology laboratory workers, pest control workers, restorers of historic or abandoned buildings, roofers, and spelunkers.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms will not show up right away. You may start feeling sick 3–17 days after breathing in the fungus. While most cases of histoplasmosis are mild, it can sometimes be very serious or even fatal. That's why it's important to pay attention to symptoms and see a doctor if needed. Look out for:



Fever or chills



Cough



Chest pain, body aches



Feeling very tired

What should you do if you have symptoms?

- **See a doctor or nurse** if your symptoms do not get better or become worse.
- **Bring this fact sheet and explain that you are at risk of histoplasmosis.** Since histoplasmosis is rare and many of the symptoms are the same as common illnesses, doctors and nurses may not test for it unless they know you are at risk.

How can I prevent getting histoplasmosis while working?

There is no test to see if the fungus that causes histoplasmosis is present in the area before work begins. If work must be done in areas where bird or bat droppings have accumulated:

- Do not dig or move dirt or droppings on windy days.
- Do not eat, smoke, or remove your mask for any other reason in an area where dirt or droppings have been disturbed.
- Reduce or eliminate dust. Spray water or use dust suppression techniques when cleaning up areas with bird or bat droppings.
- Dispose of material that may be contaminated with old bat or bird droppings safely; keep wetted and place in secure containers.
- Wear personal protective equipment (PPE) as recommended below. Wash your hands after removing PPE.



Those with a weakened immune system or lung problems:

Take extra precautions in areas with old bird and bat droppings, or avoid the area if possible.



Did you know? *Histoplasma* needs time to grow before becoming hazardous.

If bird and bat droppings are fresh, the risk of histoplasmosis is low. This means the routine cleaning of chicken coops is a low risk activity. People who are removing droppings that have accumulated for a year or more, though, are at elevated risk.



What PPE can help protect me?

- **Facemask or respirator:** A facemask will help, and a high-quality respirator (N95, N99) provides the most protection.
- **Eye protection.**
- **Gloves** to help keep fungi away from your skin.
- **Clothes and shoes that can be taken off at the worksite** (like disposable or washable coveralls, boots, hat, helmet).

For more information visit:

dhs.wi.gov/disease/histoplasmosis.htm



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