

# **Giardia and Other Intestinal Protozoal Infections in Pet Birds**

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Your bird has been diagnosed with a protozoal infection. Protozoa are microscopic parasites that live in your bird's intestines. Protozoal infections such as Giardia, Hexamita, and Trichomonas are common in small parrots such as budgerigars, lovebirds, and cockatiels.

Protozoal infections alter the intestinal environment, interfering with the absorption of vitamins and nutrients, and with the digestion of fat. Infected birds often show symptoms of malnutrition. Providing your bird with an optimal diet, such as a pelleted food, is an important part of eliminating protozoal infections. It is also important to treat any other diseases your bird may have, as these could be weakening your bird's immune system, making it more difficult for him to eliminate these parasites.

Birds showing symptoms of protozoal infection may have chronic or intermittent diarrhea, lethargy, or poor appetite. Dry skin, itchiness, and feather picking can also occur. However, not all infected birds act sick, and asymptomatic carriers are very common. In addition, protozoa are shed in the droppings irregularly, so a negative fecal examination does not mean that a bird is not infected. If one of your birds has been diagnosed with a protozoal infection, it is important to treat all birds in your household who come into contact with the infected bird, or who share perches or toys with your infected bird.

Protozoal parasites form resistant cysts which are shed in the feces. These cysts are infectious and are easily spread to other birds if ingested. Cysts can survive in the environment for several weeks. All cages should have grates to prevent access to droppings, and cage papers should be changed daily. In addition, a thorough disinfection of your bird's cage, toys, and play areas is an integral part of eliminating protozoal infections. While treating your bird with the medication prescribed by your veterinarian, it is important to disinfect non-porous cage, toy, and dish surfaces at least once a week. Effective disinfection can be performed as follows: first, thoroughly wash surfaces with mild dish soap, and rinse well. Then, apply a dilute bleach solution (one part bleach to 32 parts water) and allow 10-20 minutes of contact time. Finally, rinse thoroughly with water to remove all traces of bleach. Remember that while bleach is an effective disinfectant, it is also a respiratory irritant and should never be used around your bird. Porous surfaces, such as wood and rope toys or perches, cannot be effectively disinfected, and should be discarded and replaced. Protozoal cysts can also survive on your bird's feathers, and be ingested during grooming. Follow your veterinarians recommendations concerning bathing or showering your bird while he's on medication.

People can also get protozoal infections. People usually become infected with a different type of protozoal parasites than birds do. However, people who are immunosuppressed, such as those with AIDS or those on chemotherapy, should avoid contact with infected birds.

While most protozoal infections are easily cleared, the sensitivity of protozoa to antiparasitic medications is variable and difficult to predict. It is therefore important that your bird be retested after treatment to determine if the treatment was successful. Because reinfection can mimic resistance, appropriate cleaning and disinfecting must be instituted in conjunction with treatment.