Bird Breeder's Lung
hypersensitivity pneumonitis

by Adrienne Vincent

What is Bird Breeder's Lung?

Bird Breeder's Lung or Bird Breeder's Disease is one of the many common names given to hypersensitivity pneumonitis, also known as allergic alveolitis. The condition is an inflammation in the lungs caused by exposure to a foreign substance, usually organic dust. The offending particles may come from bird dust, but birds are not the exclusive culprit. It can come from molds or even plants. Hypersensitivity pneumonitis is frequently an occupational hazard. It is also known as, Pigeon Breeder's Lung, Farmer's lung, Mushroom Picker's Disease, Cheese Workers Lung, Humidifier or air-conditioner lung and many other names.

Although not a problem for most bird owners, bird dust and feather particles can cause serious damage to lungs. The situation is more likely to occur when many birds are kept in a confined space and exposure is over a prolonged period of time.

Acute hypersensitivity pneumonitis

The acute version of Bird Breeder's Lung occurs when a person is already sensitive and becomes exposed to a large amount of contamination. For example, a person could inhale particles from feathers and fecal material when cleaning out a very dirty aviary.

Acute illness tend to occur four to six hours after the exposure. Symptoms might include a cough, fever, chills, body ache, extreme tiredness and difficulty in breathing. As long as the exposure doesn't continue, it is not usually necessary to treat the condition as the symptoms will generally subside within days, if not hours.

Chronic hypersensitivity pneumonitis

While the acute version of this disease is the result of exposure to a substantial amount of contamination (like bird dust) it happens from a single exposure. The chronic form of the illness, however, comes from repeated exposure. In fact, the more a person is exposed to these particles, the less contaminant is needed to cause a reaction.

The chronic version of this disease is more serious. Prolonged exposure to bird dust or other organic particles can lead to permanent damage and disability. For example, pulmonary fibrosis, which is a scarring of lung tissue, can be caused by repeated bouts of hypersensitivity pneumonitis. Chronic Bird Breeder's Lung does not require extreme amounts of contamination, but it does require frequent exposure.

Pet Birds, Allergies and Cleaning the Air

Not everyone who has birds will have a problem with hypersensitivity pneumonitis, particularly since people vary in their sensitivity to particulates in the air. But the fact is that birds do produce a dust that can trigger allergic reactions which can include hypersensitivity pneumonitis, allergic rhinitis, and some types of asthma.

People can react to the powder that birds give off just like they can react to dog or cat dander. Even if you do not have an allergic reaction to this powder, it can still irritate lungs — especially in sensitive people. Some species of birds generate more of the powder than others and multiple birds obviously cause more indoor pollution than just one will.

Prolong exposure can increase sensitivity to bird dust. Since birds can be part of your family for many
years, people who have only mild allergic reactions, or no reactions at all, may find themselves very sensitive to their bird and suddenly suffer allergic symptoms.

The best way to reduce the amount of allergens in the air and possibly prevent problems in the future, is to use a high quality air purifier. The right air cleaner can dramatically reduce the quantity of offending particles of bird dust as well as normal indoor pollutants like dust, dander and pollen.

We always recommend HEPA or better. HEPA (which stands for High Efficiency Particle Arresting) is a government standard. No manufacturer of air purifiers can claim to be HEPA unless their unit removes 99.97% of particles greater than .3 microns in size. Bird dust and dog and cat dander are large enough to be trapped in the HEPA material.

What's Wrong with Ionizers and Ozone Generators?

IMPORTANT: DO NOT EVEN CONSIDER AN IONIZER NO MATTER WHAT THE COMMERCIALS TELL YOU!!!

Not all machines claiming to be air purifiers will clean the air. We believe that only air purifiers that capture and retain particulates (like HEPA units do) are effective. Do not be tricked into buying a machine without filters. If there is no filter, the particles cannot be removed.

The units that boast of requiring no filter changes are the ionizers like Sharper Image’s Ionic Breeze or ozone generators such as the Living Air Classic. Unfortunately, not only are they not effective in removing pollutants, they generate dangerous levels of ozone. Ozone changes lung tissue in humans and birds and triggers asthma attacks in people who have asthma. Ozone is especially damaging to children.

These units have no fans to draw air and have no filters to catch particles. The Ionic Breeze traps a very small amount of dust on its plates as long as the plates are cleaned very frequently. The Living Air Classic doesn't even do that. Although these manufacturers would have you believe that the chlorine-like smell their units produce is a good thing, in fact that is the by-product of ozone.

According to the EPA, ionizers are not effective in removing particles, chemicals or odors and, to add insult to injury, generate unwanted ozone. The EPA states:

“When inhaled, ozone can damage the lungs. Relatively low amounts can cause chest pain, coughing, shortness of breath, and, throat irritation. Ozone may also worsen chronic respiratory diseases such as asthma and compromise the ability of the body to fight respiratory infections.”

Both the EPA and the American Lung Association are very clear about the dangers of ozones -- any amount of it. Both organizations recommend HEPA units that do not generate ozone to clean indoor air.

Recommendation

If you own birds, you need an air purifier. To be effective, you'll need something with both good particle filtration and a significant amount of carbon. Here are a few excellent choices:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Air Purifier</th>
<th>Advantage</th>
<th>Price Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austin Air</td>
<td>This is the first air purifier that we offered. We originally discovered the Austin Healthmate by reading postings in the rec.pets.birds news group. We found that people who had birds raved over their Healthmates, so we did our own research. We were impressed with the large amount of true HEPA material and carbon that comes in the Healthmate. Maintenance on this unit is very low – you just need to vacuum it from the outside to keep the prefilter clean. The HEPA filter can last up to five years and is even under a prorated warranty.</td>
<td>$419-$649</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IQAir</strong></td>
<td>The IQAir HealthPro air purifiers are spectacular at remove bird dust, but unlike HEPA filters that remove particles that are .3 microns or larger in size, the IQAir captures particles as small as viruses. This machine removes everything a HEPA filter gets and 99% of what HEPA misses. We recommend them even over our units with UV bulbs to control viruses, bacteria and mold. For bird owners, we recommend the optional Coarse Pre-Filtration kit that will catch much of the bird dust and thus extend the life of the other filters.</td>
<td>$799-$899</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Airpura</strong></td>
<td>Airpura air purifiers are HEPA units with carbon, but they cover a larger area than the Austin Healthmate. We like that there are choices of carbon and that we can configure them with a special prefilter that will capture more bird dust than the standard prefilter. Optional UV upgrade available.</td>
<td>$649-$1249</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As a bonus, these air purifiers can also protect your bird from YOU! In addition to removing airborne particles, each of these units has a large amount of activated carbon that absorbs odors and chemicals. Many household items such as bleach, tobacco smoke, cleaning solutions, etc., can kill your bird. Over-heated Teflon is extremely toxic to birds and small animals -- and it isn't good for people, either. While there is no guarantee that toxins will never reach your pet, the significant amount of carbon in these air cleaners will remove vapors much faster than inferior units with minimal or non-existent amounts of carbon.

**More Information**

More information on toxic chemicals, safe and unsafe plants, bird diseases, and health and safety issues can be found at the Hotspot for Birds website: [http://www.hotspot4birds.com](http://www.hotspot4birds.com)

More choices of air purifiers can be found at [airfilterstore.com](http://www.airfilterstore.com)

We can also be reached by email at email14@hotspot4birds.com or by phone at (888)246-8776 or (323)851-1878