

**What is histoplasmosis?**

A fungus called *Histoplasma capsulatum*, which exists in two distinct forms, a mold and yeast, causes histoplasmosis. The mold form is found in the soil, often in areas where bird and bat droppings are located. The bird droppings are found to enhance growth of the fungus. The yeast form is found in infected people. Histoplasmosis is a disease that usually involves the lungs, but may affect other areas of the body. In the U.S., most cases are found along the Ohio and Mississippi River Valleys.

**What are the symptoms of histoplasmosis?**

Most infected persons have no apparent ill effects. Respiratory symptoms, a general ill feeling, fever, chest pains, and a dry or nonproductive cough characterize the acute respiratory disease. Distinct patterns may be seen on a chest x-ray. Chronic lung disease resembles tuberculosis and can worsen over months or years. The disseminated form is fatal unless treated.

Five disease forms are recognized:

1. An "asymptomatic form" where no illness occurs, but people may have an altered laboratory test.
2. An "acute benign respiratory form" with 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.
3. An "acute disseminated (scattered throughout) form" with fever, vomiting or diarrhea, and enlarged lymph nodes and or spleen. Without treatment this form may be fatal. This stage usually occurs in infants, young children, and immune compromised people.
4. A "chronic disseminated form" with fever (which may come and go), 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 is usually fatal unless treated.
5. A "chronic pulmonary form," which resembles tuberculosis of the lungs both in symptoms and on x-ray. The 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.

**How soon do symptoms appear?**

Symptoms usually occur within 3-17 days after exposure. Many infections are overlooked; since they either have no symptoms or cause such a minor, brief respiratory illness that the person does not seek medical care. If you have questions regarding any of the above symptoms contact your healthcare provider or the Iowa Department of Public Health at (800) 362-2736.

**How is histoplasmosis spread?**

The fungus is found in the soil and transmitted through the air. Transmission occurs when soil is disturbed, causing the fungus to become airborne. People then breathe in the fungus. Once inside a person's body the fungus will start growing and cause disease. The disease cannot be transmitted from one person to another.

**Who gets histoplasmosis?**

Anyone can be infected.

**For how long is a person infectious?**

The disease cannot be transmitted from one person to another.

**What is the treatment for this illness?**

Histoplasmosis is sensitive to many drugs. The treatment may be long term lasting from several months up to a year. Antifungal medications are used to treat severe cases of acute histoplasmosis and all cases of chronic and disseminated disease. Mild disease usually resolves without treatment. Past infection results in partial protection against ill effects if reinfected. See your healthcare provider for more specific treatment information.

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

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

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

Workers cleaning up or disturbing soil at possibly contaminated sites should wear a mask. Before disturbing soil, spray the area with water or oil to minimize spread.