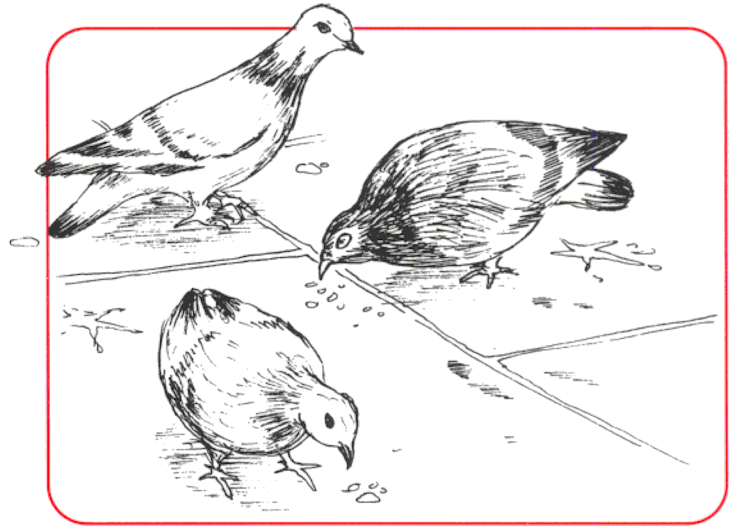


Pigeon Control:

PREVENTING DISEASE

New Yorkers are used to seeing pigeons everyday. We accept their presence as a part of everyday life, until they begin to share your workplace? This fact sheet will help you understand the hazards pigeons present and the ways you can avoid them.



What hazards are related to pigeons?

Pigeons are harmless animals. They do not attack people and generally do not cause any problems themselves. There is a small problem, however, with what they leave behind. Pigeon and other bird and bat droppings have been linked to several health problems, such as ornithosis (a mild form of psittacosis), cryptococcosis and histoplasmosis. The most common hazard associated with pigeon dropping is **histoplasmosis**.

What is Histoplasmosis?

Histoplasmosis is a non-contagious infection that is caused when a person inhales spores of a fungus called *Histoplasma capsulatum*. Old and accumulated droppings and soil, that are contaminated with bird droppings can contain the *H. capsulatum* fungus. Spores of the fungus can become airborne when the material is disturbed.

Histoplasmosis generally affects the lungs and can have varying effects. Most people who are infected never develop symptoms and are not diagnosed. Others may develop flu-like symptoms that disappear after a few days. Still some people may develop more serious problems such as a chronic lung disease that resembles tuberculosis which, if gone untreated, can be fatal. People with weakened immune systems, such as those with AIDS or who receive chemotherapy treatments for cancer, are more susceptible to developing symptoms. The amount of exposure will also affect the severity of the disease.

Where is *Histoplasma capsulatum* found?

Pigeons themselves are not infected by *H. capsulatum*, which means that fresh droppings on sidewalks or windowsills would pose no known health threat. They can, however, carry the fungus spores on their feet, wings or beaks and can carry it to any area in which it can grow. *H. capsulatum* grows best in nutrient rich soils, but can also grow when soil is not present. The fact that pigeon droppings act as a fertilizer to soils under roost, combined with the fact that the birds can spread the spores, make areas that are homes to pigeons hazardous. All soils and accumulations of old pigeon droppings in these areas should be considered hazardous unless proven otherwise.

How is Histoplasmosis spread?

Histoplasmosis is caused by inhaling airborne spores of *H. capsulatum*. Anyone who is present near or working at a site where *H. capsulatum* is airborne can be infected if they inhale the spores. The spores generally become airborne when contaminated areas are disturbed. Some occupations at risk include, but are not limited to:

- bridge inspector or painter
- construction worker
- demolition worker
- heating and air conditioning system installer or service person

- pest control worker
- restorer of historic or abandoned buildings
- roofer

Poorly maintained rooftop ventilation systems and window mounted air conditioners can also create airborne spores if pigeons are allowed to roost in or near the units.

How do you avoid exposure?

There are several ways to avoid exposure to histoplasmosis and other related diseases. One way is to recognize areas that are potentially contaminated and avoid them. If you are required to work in or near any such area, you should request that any suspect soil or accumulation of droppings be properly removed. Building ventilation systems should also be kept clear of birds and bird droppings.

How do you clean possibly contaminated areas?

It is the employer's responsibility to train any worker who might be exposed or might disturb contaminated areas. Workers who are required to clean these areas should receive training on the proper techniques. These techniques may include:

- Saturating possibly contaminated materials with a water and bleach solution.
- Avoiding power washing or sweeping to reduce airborne spores.
- Disposing of contaminated waste.
- Using protective clothing.
- Using a HEPA filtered respirator.
- Decontaminating tools and equipment.

For more information on any of these issues, please contact the DC 37 Safety and Health Unit at 212-815-1685.