

Safety Toolbox Talks

BRIESER CONSTRUCTION COMPANY SITE SAFETY MEETING - TOOL BOX

The intent of this safety discussion is to ensure that Brieser Construction employees are aware of the potential health risks associated with exposures to *Histoplasma Capsulatum* – the organism responsible for *histoplasmosis*. Besides, this article will identify health symptoms, likely exposure sources, related occupations, preventive work practices and personal protective equipment.

Symptoms

Histoplasmosis is a fungal infection resulting from inhalation of spores of the organism called *Histoplasma Capsulatum*. Individuals infected by the organism manifest symptoms such as mild influenza-like illness with fever, cough, headaches and muscle aches. These symptoms may manifest themselves in exposed individuals within 3 – 17 days after exposures. Chronic form of *histoplasmosis* can mimic tuberculosis. According to the National Eye Institute (NIE), *histoplasmosis*, if left untreated, can cause a serious eye disease called **Ocular Histoplasmosis Syndrome (OHS)**, a leading cause of vision loss in America between the age groups of 20 – 40

Exposure Sources

Spores of the organism are found in and around soils or structures where bird or bat droppings had accumulated. The organism already exists in the soil, and uses bird droppings as a source of nutrient for its growth and development. Areas of high concentrations of *Histoplasma Capsulatum* are typically places enriched with droppings from birds or bats. The wings, feet and beaks of birds can be secondary means of spreading the organism to the roosting sites of large number of birds. Likely places for the organism to exist will be roof overhangs, pillars, beams, roof edges, vent holes, below the fascia board and abandoned buildings. Any activity that disturbs soil around the areas where large numbers of birds or bats have been roosting is a potential and likely exposure source.

Prevention

The summer season is at its end and outdoor work activities are still increasingly common. Individuals working in areas contaminated with bird or bat droppings are most likely to be exposed to *Histoplasma Capsulatum* organism. OSHA does not have specific regulation on *histoplasmosis*. However, OSHA's, General Duty clause requires employers to provide "a workplace free of recognized hazards that are likely to cause death or serious physical harm to the employees". While it may not be practical to decontaminate all sites contaminated with

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Histoplasma Capsulatum organism, the following work practices and personal protective equipment may be helpful:

- Avoid work sites where there are accumulations of bird or bat droppings.
- Inspect suspected work sites for visual evidence of bird droppings before starting work activities.
- Communicate to workers about the health risks of *histoplasmosis*.
- Post a warning sign with associated health risks of *H. Capsulatum* to pre-warn individuals.
- If individuals cannot avoid working around a contaminated work environment, first wet the surroundings and saturate the excrement with a 2-5% hypochlorite solution, which is made from a concentration of 50% water and 50% household bleach. This will eliminate the possibility of workers becoming exposed to respiratory or skin irritants, as well as guarding against contracting **Histo-Plasmosis**.
- Contaminated waste from work site should be removed, transported and properly disposed in landfills.
- Water sprays or other dust suppression techniques should be used to reduce employee exposure to dust during construction, excavation, demolition or any activity in areas where *H. capsulatum* is present and is disturbed.
- Personal protective equipment like, NIOSH –approved respirator, disposable coveralls and dust covers, are very important method of protection to our employees.

Before starting any work activity that has potential risks for exposure to *Histoplasma Capsulatum*” organism, consult Brieser Construction Safety Department.

