

Questions & Answers on Chronic Wasting Disease for Hunters



What is Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD)?

CWD is a neurological (brain and nervous system) disease found in deer, elk and moose (collectively referred to as cervids) in certain geographical locations in North America. The disease belongs to a family of diseases known as transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSE) or prion diseases. CWD attacks the brains of infected cervids and is always fatal. Though CWD is similar to mad cow disease in cattle and scrapie in sheep, there is no known relationship between CWD and any other TSE found in animals or humans.

How is it spread?

It is not completely understood how CWD is spread. It is believed that the agent responsible for the disease may be spread both directly (animal to animal contact) and indirectly (soil or other surface to animal). It is thought that the most common mode of transmission from an infected animal may be via saliva and feces.

Where has it been found?

CWD is known to infect wild deer, elk and moose in the northern two-thirds of Colorado, wild deer and elk in southern Wyoming and southwestern South Dakota, and wild deer in western and central Nebraska, northwestern Kansas, southcentral Wisconsin, southcentral New Mexico, eastern Utah, northern Illinois, central New York, northern West Virginia, westcentral Saskatchewan and southeastern Alberta. It has been diagnosed in farmed — and captive — cervid facilities in Alberta, Colorado, Kansas, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, New York, Oklahoma, Saskatchewan, South Dakota and Wisconsin.

Is it dangerous to humans?

There is currently no evidence that CWD is transmissible to humans. However, public health officials recommend that human exposure to the CWD agent be avoided as they continue to research the disease.

Is the meat safe to eat?

Although the agent that causes CWD has not been positively identified, strong evidence suggests that prions are responsible. Prions are abnormally shaped proteins that are not destroyed by cooking. Accordingly, hunters are advised not to eat meat from animals known to be infected with CWD. Research completed to date indicates that prions generally accumulate in certain parts of infected animals — the brain, eyes, spinal cord, lymph nodes, tonsils and spleen. Based on these findings, hunters in CWD areas are advised to completely bone out harvested cervids in the field and not consume those parts of the animal where prions likely accumulate.

What precautions should hunters take?

Health officials advise hunters not to shoot, handle or consume any animal that is acting abnormally or appears to be sick. In addition, they suggest hunters take the normal, simple precautions when field dressing a carcass. A complete list of current hunter recommendations is available at www.cwd-info.org.

How can you tell if a deer, elk or moose has CWD?

Infected animals may not show any obvious signs of CWD until late in the course of the disease. In late stages of the disease, infected animals begin to lose bodily functions and display abnormal behavior such as staggering or standing with very poor posture. Animals may show an exaggerated, wide stance or carry their head and ears lowered. Infected animals become emaciated (thus, wasting disease) and will appear in very poor body condition. Some infected animals drink large amounts of water. Drooling or excessive salivation may be apparent. Note that these symptoms may also be characteristic of diseases other than CWD.



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What should I do if I see a deer, elk or moose that shows signs of CWD?

Many things can cause emaciation or neurological disease in wild cervids. Unless your state wildlife agency or another appropriate authority has issued other instructions or regulations, you should accurately document the location of the animal and immediately contact the nearest officer or employee of the state wildlife agency. Do not attempt to contact, disturb, kill or remove the animal.

Can I have a deer, elk or moose tested?

In general, most states conduct surveillance for CWD through a network of 26 certified laboratories. If you are hunting in an area where surveillance is occurring, you may be required to submit your harvested animal for testing. If you are not, but still wish to have your animal tested for CWD, contact the local wildlife agency for the appropriate procedures and submission location. Remember, such testing is an important tool for detecting CWD, but it is not a food safety test.

What is being done to combat CWD?

Extensive surveillance programs that monitor CWD distribution and prevalence have been instituted nationwide. In CWD-positive and -exposed facilities for farmed and captive cervids, the preferred management approach is state quarantine, followed by whole herd depopulation and appropriate carcass disposal. Federal support, including financial compensation, is usually available for these activities. In some cases, double fencing around captive populations is recommended to prevent direct contact between captive and wild animals. A management option currently utilized by several wildlife agen-

cies is to reduce the density of wild cervids in infected areas in an effort to slow the transmission of the disease. This is primarily being done by increasing the number of hunting licenses issued to hunters. Additionally, some states selectively cull animals suspected to have been directly exposed to the disease. Nearly every state wildlife agency has increased surveillance efforts to detect the potential presence of CWD. Many state agencies have banned the importation of live deer and elk into their states, and some also have halted intrastate movement of deer and elk. A number of states have banned supplemental feeding and baiting, which artificially congregates animals and enhances disease transmission.

Several states also have implemented regulations that allow only boned meat, quarters (without spinal column or head) or processed meat from deer or elk to be exported or imported from certain areas containing CWD. Clean skull plates with antlers attached can also be transported. Check with the state wildlife agency in the state where you hunt and where you live to determine if such restrictions apply. Other states have limited the importation of hunter-killed deer and elk to only boned or processed meat. An interactive North American map summarizing state and provincial carcass transportation regulations can be found at www.cwd-info.org.

A national chronic wasting disease plan was developed and delivered to Congress in 2002. The plan outlines a coordinated approach for states and federal agencies to develop research, surveillance and management strategies for CWD as well as communication plans for disseminating information on a regional or national scale.

The plan can be viewed at www.cwd-info.org.



What can hunters do?

Hunters need to assist wildlife agencies in the management of CWD and wild cervid populations and should report any animals that appear to have the disease. Additionally, hunters should relay their concerns about CWD to political leaders and encourage support for adequate and sustained funding of the National CWD Plan and for increased assistance to state wildlife and agricultural agencies to research, monitor and manage CWD.

What if I hunt in a state where CWD has not been found?

Concerns over CWD should not stop you from enjoying this hunting season. Take the normal precautions recommended when dressing any wild game. State and provincial wildlife agencies are continuously improving and modifying their surveillance for CWD, so be alert to their advisories.

Whom should I contact to find out more?

Hunters are encouraged to contact their state wildlife agency for information and updates on the status of CWD in that state. Nearly every state wildlife agency Web site posts information about CWD as well as links to other organizations managing the disease. The Chronic Wasting Disease Alliance Web site at www.cwd-info.org is a clearinghouse for CWD news, information, regulations and resources. Check the site frequently for updates or email questions regarding CWD issues.

**This information was accurate as of July 9, 2007.
The Chronic Wasting Disease Alliance Web site is at www.cwd-info.org.
Check the site frequently for updates to this information.**