

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD)

What is Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD)?

CWD is a disease found in some deer and elk populations that damages portions of the brain and typically causes progressive loss of body condition, behavioral changes, excessive salivation and death. The cause of the disease is suspected to be a type of prion (protein infectious particle) that is found in some tissues of infected animals.

Where does CWD occur?

CWD is a disease that is unique to North America. As of March, 2005, CWD has been found in **wild deer and/or elk** in Colorado, Illinois, Nebraska, New Mexico, South Dakota, Utah, Wisconsin, Wyoming, and in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan. In **captive deer and/or elk**, it has been found in Colorado, Kansas, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, New York, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Wisconsin, Wyoming, and in the Canadian provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan.

How is CWD transmitted?

Experimental evidence indicates that infected deer and elk probably transmit the disease through animal-animal contact, maternal transmission (mother animal to fetus), and/or contamination of feed or water sources with saliva or bodily waste material. The transmission may be enhanced when deer and elk are congregated around man-made feed and water stations.

How soon after CWD exposure do signs of infection appear?

CWD has a long incubation period and typically takes at least 16 months for an infected animal to show signs of illness. Infected animals do not show signs of illness until they have been infected for a number of months.

Are domestic animals at risk for CWD?

There is no indication to date that CWD is a threat to domestic animals or livestock other than deer or elk, and there have been no reports of CWD in dogs or cats.

Are prion diseases transmissible to humans?

Although there is considerable ongoing research on this issue, there is no confirmed human neurologic disease linked to CWD at this time. In addition, there have never been any indications of human illness related to scrapie in sheep. However, ingestion of cattle infected with BSE overseas appears to be related to human deaths from a new variant of a previously identified neurologic disease, Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD).

Are there health risks for hunters in handling deer or elk?

There is no evidence to date that hunters have a risk of acquiring CWD. Depending on how an animal is handled, there may be a risk of other diseases including rabies. Hunters should observe normal precautions around any animals, such as avoiding sick or strange-acting

animals. They must report to their local health department any potential rabies exposures such as an animal bite or scratch, or contact between a person's eyes, nose, or mouth (mucous membranes) or fresh open wound with the animal's saliva, brain, or other nervous tissue.

What should be done if someone sees a sick deer/elk?

Because a sick deer or elk could have rabies, **if there has been human contact of concern (see above) the animal must be reported to the local health department.** After the animal has been humanely euthanized, the local health department will send the head to the New York State Health Department's Rabies Laboratory for rabies testing. Animals that are negative for rabies will be submitted for subsequent CWD testing. **If there has been no human contact, the sick animal should be reported to the nearest New York State Department of Environmental Conservation office** for humane euthanasia and CWD testing.

Are there any precautions for handling, processing, or eating meat from deer or elk?

To minimize the risk of transmission of any infectious diseases when handling or processing animals, the following precautions are recommended:

- Deer or elk that are observed to be ill, or found dead, should not be handled and should not be eaten.
- Wear rubber gloves when field dressing carcasses.
- Wash instruments and any parts of the body exposed to animal tissues, blood, urine, etc. thoroughly with soap and water.
- Minimize handling brain or spinal tissues/fluids and wash hands thoroughly with soap and water afterward if such handling occurred. If these nervous tissues or fluids get into a fresh open break in a person's skin or the eyes, mouth, or nose, contact the local health department to evaluate possible rabies exposure and need for testing the animal for other diseases.
- Request if possible that individual animals are processed individually, without meat from other animals being added together.
- Although no CWD risk to humans has been identified from consumption of organ meat, in general consumption of organ meat (including brain, spinal cord, and other nervous tissue, spleen, pancreas, eyes, tonsils, lymph nodes) may pose a greater risk of infection with a number of diseases. Boning out meat, including removal of fat, connective tissue, and lymph nodes, should be done with animals from states with confirmed CWD.
- Animals testing positive for CWD should not be distributed or donated for human consumption.
- For more information about handling, processing, or eating meat from deer or elk in other states, contact those state agriculture, wildlife, and health agencies.

Are there any risks from deer waste or products?

Although there is no indication of human infection due to contact with deer waste or products related to CWD-infected deer or elk, the following general disease control precautions are recommended:

- Avoid contact with animal bodily waste material, and clean up animal waste from areas frequented by children.
- If there is skin contact with animal waste, wash the area with soap and water immediately.
- Deer scent products should be formulated with methods to avoid concerns about CWD contamination.

How is CWD diagnosed?

While apparently healthy animals might be infected, eventually infected animals will develop signs of illness. Definitive diagnosis for the disease currently requires laboratory testing of the brain and/or lymph nodes.

Can a specific deer or elk be tested?

There is ongoing CWD surveillance in New York State, but a fee-for-service program of testing individual animals is not currently available. Precautions provided above for handling and consumption should be followed.

Where is there additional and updated information about CWD?

More information about CWD is available from the following agencies:

- The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation:
<http://www.dec.state.ny.us/website/dfwmr/wildlife/deer/cwd.html>
- The New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets:
<http://www.agmkt.state.ny.us/AI/cwd.html>
- The New York State Department of Health:
<http://www.nyhealth.gov/nysdoh/zoonoses/cwd.htm>
- Additional information, including the status of CWD in other states, is also available from the USDA:
<http://www.aphis.usda.gov/vs/naahps/cwd/>
- USGS National Wildlife Health Center:
http://www.nwhc.usgs.gov/research/chronic_wasting/chronic_wasting.html
- Chronic Wasting Disease Alliance:
<http://www.cwd-info.org>
- Other state agencies may have valuable information, particularly for deer or elk from those states. Wisconsin has a particularly useful Website with detailed information and photos for processing deer, and a videotape and transcript addressing questions about human health risks:
<http://dnr.wi.gov/org/land/wildlife/whealth/issues/CWD/>

For additional information you may contact the toll-free information line at 1-800-808-1987.