



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

Department of Health

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Chronic Wasting Disease Factsheet

What is Chronic Wasting Disease?

CWD is a fatal disease that affects the nervous system of elk, red deer, moose, mule deer, white-tailed deer, and black-tailed deer. The disease is caused by an abnormal protein called a prion, which can survive cooking temperatures. Prions concentrate in certain tissues, such as brain, spinal cord, lymph nodes, and spleen. CWD belongs to the group of diseases called transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSEs).

What are the symptoms of Chronic Wasting Disease?

Some of the clinical signs of CWD in deer and elk are weight loss, lack of coordination, head tremors, lowered head and ears, changes in attitude (e.g., loss of fear of people) and drooling.

How is the disease spread?

The mode of transmission among animals has not yet been identified. Evidence suggests that the disease can pass from animal to animal by direct contact or by feed or pasture contaminated with saliva, urine, and/or feces of infected animals.

How can the spread of Chronic Wasting Disease be prevented?

Because transmission mechanisms are still not well understood, it is difficult to recommend measures to prevent spread of the disease. Surveillance, culling, and testing are performed in areas where cases of CWD have been identified in an attempt to contain the disease within that endemic area. Unfortunately, no vaccine or preventatives exist and there is no evidence that immunity to CWD develops.

Can Chronic Wasting Disease be spread to other animals?

CWD is not known to be a disease that can be naturally transmitted to other animals such as dogs or cows. Only members of the deer family are known to be susceptible.

Can Chronic Wasting Disease be transmitted to humans?

The World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention agree that there is currently no scientific evidence suggesting that CWD can cause disease in humans. However, in the interest of safety, these organizations advise people not to consume the meat from deer or elk which are known to be positive for CWD.

What precautions should people take when handling deer or elk carcasses in CWD areas?

The following simple precautions are recommended when handling deer or elk carcasses where CWD occurs:

- Do not shoot, handle or consume any animal that is abnormal or appears to be sick. If you see a sick deer, please contact the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries immediately.
- Wear latex or rubber gloves when field dressing your deer carcass.
- Bone out meat from your animal. Do not saw through bone and avoid cutting through the brain or spinal cord (backbone).
- Minimize the handling of brain and spinal tissues or fluids.
- Wash hands and instruments thoroughly after field dressing is completed.
- Avoid consuming brain, spinal cord, eyes, spleen, tonsils, and lymph nodes of deer. Normal field dressing coupled with boning out a carcass will remove most, if not all, of these body parts.
- If you have your deer commercially processed, request that your animal be processed individually, without meat from other animals being added.

Where can I get more information about Chronic Wasting Disease?

- Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (www.dgif.virginia.gov)
- Chronic Wasting Disease Alliance (www.cwd-info.org)
- Southeastern Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study (www.uga.edu/scwds/briefs.htm)
- United States Department of Agriculture, Animal Plant Health Inspection Service (www.aphis.usda.gov/animal_health/animal_diseases/cwd)

References:

<http://dhs.wisconsin.gov/communicable/CWD/HunterInformation.pdf>

http://gf.state.wy.us/wildlife/wildlife_management/art_labcwd.asp

http://www.avma.org/communications/cwd/cwd_bgnd.asp

<http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/diseases/cwd/cwd-brochure.pdf>