What is chronic wasting disease and who gets it?

Chronic wasting disease (CWD) is a prion disease that affects deer, elk, reindeer, sika deer, and moose in some areas of North America, including Canada and the United States, Norway and South Korea. CWD has been found in deer in the northeastern part of Virginia. To date, there have been no reported cases of CWD infection in people, however, animal studies suggest CWD poses a risk to some types of non-human primates, like monkeys, that eat meat from CWD infected animals or come in contact with brain or body fluids from infected deer or elk. These studies raise concerns that there may also be a risk to people.

How is chronic wasting disease spread?

Scientists believe CWD prions likely spread between animals through body fluids like feces, saliva, blood, or urine, either through direct contact or indirectly through environmental contamination of soil, food, or water. Once introduced into an area, the CWD protein is contagious within deer and elk populations and can spread quickly. Experts believe CWD prions can remain in the environment for a long time, so other animals can contract CWD from the environment even after an infected deer or elk has died.

What are the signs of chronic wasting disease and how soon after exposure do signs appear?

Clinical signs in affected animals can include drastic weight loss (wasting), stumbling, listlessness, and other neurologic signs, which may take over a year to develop. CWD can affect animals of all ages and some infected animals may die without ever developing the disease.

How is chronic wasting disease diagnosed?

Brain and lymph node tissue from animals can be examined with a microscope using a special stain to identify the CWD prion. Information about CWD testing in Virginia can be found at https://www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/diseases/cwd/.

What is the treatment for chronic wasting disease?

CWD is fatal to animals and there are no treatments or vaccines.

How can chronic wasting disease be prevented?

Prevention of CWD in animals includes strategies such as lowering the density of certain animal populations, banning feeding or baiting of deer in areas with CWD, and prohibiting movement of certain animal carcasses out of an area where CWD has been found.

To date, there is no strong evidence for the occurrence of CWD in people and it is not known if people can get infected with CWD prions. Nevertheless, experimental studies raise the concern that CWD may pose a risk to people and suggest that it is important to prevent human exposures to CWD.

Additional studies are under way to identify if any prion diseases could be occurring at a higher rate in people who are at increased risk for contact with potentially CWD-infected deer or elk meat. Given the length of time it takes before symptoms of disease appear, scientists expect the study to take many years before a determination will be made on what risk, if any, CWD is to people.

How can I learn more about chronic wasting disease?

- If you have concerns about Chronic Wasting Disease, contact your healthcare provider.
- Call your local health department. A directory of local health departments is located at https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/local-health-districts/.
- Visit Virginia's Department of Game and Inland Fisheries' website at https://www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/diseases/cwd/.
- Visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at https://www.cdc.gov/prions/cwd/index.html.

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