

CHRONIC WASTING DISEASE FACT SHEET



Chronic wasting disease (CWD) is a progressive, fatal, neurological disease affecting some members of the deer or “cervid” family. Elk, red deer, black-tailed deer, white-tailed deer, sika deer, reindeer and moose are currently known to be naturally susceptible. The disease was first recognized in 1967 in captive mule deer in Colorado, and has since been documented in captive and free-ranging deer in numerous states and Canadian provinces, as well as several other countries abroad.

Because of the lengthy incubation period, no treatment or vaccination, lack of adequate testing methods, and potential for persistent environmental contamination, this disease presents numerous challenges for wildlife agencies across North America. Of primary concern is the potential for population impacts within deer, elk, or other susceptible cervid herds. Consequently, CWD could impact hunting and hunting-related economies. In Texas, hunting is a multi-billion-dollar economic engine, supporting many rural towns across the state.

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) and Texas Animal Health Commission (TAHC) are working cooperatively to address risks, develop management strategies, and protect resources from CWD in captive and free-ranging cervid populations.

What is Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD)?

Chronic wasting disease belongs to a family of diseases known as transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSE). They are believed to be caused by prions, which are misfolded proteins that disrupt the nervous system of the host. These diseases are invariably fatal and there is currently no known cure, treatment or vaccination for them. Other TSEs include bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) in cattle, scrapie in sheep, feline spongiform encephalopathy (FSE) in cats in Europe, and Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD) and variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob (vCJD) in humans. While these diseases are similar in the lesions they create in the brain, they differ in the species they infect and their modes of transmission. CWD has a long incubation period and clinical signs may not appear for two to four years after infection. Infectious prions are shed before an animal shows symptoms.

How does it spread?

Prions are shed from secretions of infected animals in saliva, urine, blood, and feces. Prions also accumulate in body tissues, especially nervous tissue like brain and spinal cord, lymph tissue, spleen, eyeball as well as other tissues. Prions are known to persist and remain infectious in the environment for long periods of time. Deer and other cervids may become infected with CWD by direct animal-to-animal contact or indirectly by contact with a contaminated environment. CWD can be spread from one area to another by the natural movement of infected animals or by unnatural, man-assisted movement of either live, infected deer or carcass parts from infected deer.

How can you tell if a deer has CWD?

Symptoms of infected animals include emaciation, excessive salivation, lack of muscle coordination, difficulty in swallowing, excessive thirst, and excessive urination. Subtle behavioral changes like loss of fear of humans or other abnormal behavior are often the first signs noticed. Clinically-ill deer may have an exaggerated wide posture, may stagger and carry their head and ears lowered, have dull expression, and have a seemingly shaggy hair coat. These symptoms don't occur until the end stages of the disease process. It is also important to note that an infected animal may be shedding these infective prions well before symptoms become apparent. The disease cannot be diagnosed by symptoms alone since other diseases or conditions can cause the animal to exhibit similar symptoms. Definitive diagnosis is made by post-mortem laboratory testing of distinctive parts of the brain and lymph nodes in the throat. It is important to note that existing tests can only detect the disease after it has reached certain structures in the body and the animal may be shedding prions before diagnosis. **There is currently no truly negative test for CWD.**

Why are we concerned about CWD?

Population impacts to our deer herds are a major concern. Several state agencies have documented population effects in some herds that have had CWD for a long time and the prevalence or number of animals infected is high. In those herds population declines are occurring as well as shifts in age structure, to younger animals resulting in fewer mature animals. In addition, CWD infected deer in these populations are experiencing higher death losses compared to uninfected deer due to predation, car collision and more likely to be

harvested by hunters. These impacts could affect hunting and hunting related economies in Texas. While there is no known evidence that CWD can be transmitted to humans, other TSEs like BSE, have been shown to cross the species barrier to humans. The lack of treatment options, vaccination, reliable rapid diagnostic tests, and the potential for infection from persistent environmental contamination are other concerns.

Where has it been found?

With the ever-changing climate of CWD, here is a link to the most up to date map available of where CWD is/has been detected.

www.usgs.gov/media/images/distribution-chronic-wasting-disease-north-america-0

Is CWD dangerous to humans?

Researchers with the Federal Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, Georgia, and along with the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, have studied CWD and have found no evidence that CWD poses a serious risk to humans or domestic animals. The World Health Organization (WHO) has likewise advised that there is no current scientific evidence that CWD can infect humans. However, as a precaution, the WHO and the CDC strongly advise testing susceptible species harvested in known CWD areas and to not eat meat from CWD positive animals. For more information on their recommendations: www.cdc.gov/prions/cwd/prevention.html

What precautions should hunters take?

Since it's not always apparent that a deer may be carrying a disease, hunters should take simple precautions such as wearing latex gloves when field dressing carcasses and washing hands and instruments thoroughly. Ideally, processing tools should be disinfected with a 2% chlorine bleach solution (3 parts water to 2 parts household bleach) and rinsed with water after field dressing or butchering is complete. Another precautionary recommendation is to avoid sawing through bones and avoid the lymphatic and neurological tissue (i.e., lymph nodes, brain, and spine). Also, see TPWD publication Common Sense Precautions for Handling and Processing Deer (PWD LF W7000-859) for more information about processing deer. Finally, when

taking deer to a game processor, hunters may consider requesting their animals be processed individually, without meat from other animals being added to meat from your animal.

Can I have deer venison tested?

Deer "venison" cannot be tested. However, appropriate tissue samples can be tested from a harvested deer. TPWD biologists will collect tissue samples from hunter-harvested deer throughout the state. Test results from TPWD's check station sampling are conveniently posted on the TPWD CWD website within several weeks of collection. In addition, your local veterinarian or people certified through TAHC Certified CWD Sample Collector Program can collect the samples for you. The head should be kept cool, not frozen, until the sample can be collected.

What can hunters do?

Hunters should report any suspected cases of CWD to TPWD or TAHC immediately. Proper disposal of carcasses is strongly recommended for big game harvested in any area identified as a CWD endemic zone in order to minimize the risk of spreading CWD via infected carcass parts to other areas of the state. Unused carcass parts, especially the brain or spinal tissue, need to be handled responsibly and could be disposed of at the site where the animal was harvested, in a landfill, or buried. Hunters should also support Texas surveillance efforts and should report any suspected importation violations. Finally, hunters should become familiar with information about CWD as well as practical tips they may use in the field to help prevent the spread of CWD and minimize any risks associated with the disease.

What should I do if I see a deer that shows symptoms of CWD?

Accurately document the location of the animal (record GPS coordinates if possible), take pictures if possible, and immediately contact the nearest TPWD Wildlife Division or Law Enforcement Division office, or call TPWD headquarters in Austin toll-free at (800) 792-1112 and enter 5 for wildlife and 1 for general wildlife information; or contact TAHC toll-free at (800) 550-8242. Do not attempt to touch, disturb, kill or remove the animal. Early detection of CWD in an area is vital to containing the disease to prevent it spreading to other areas of the state.

To learn more:

Texas Animal Health Commission: www.tahc.state.tx.us

USDA APHIS VS: www.aphis.usda.gov

Chronic Wasting Disease Alliance: www.cwd-info.org

Texas Parks and Wildlife Dept.: www.tpwd.texas.gov/cwd

Texas Animal Health Commission: www.tahc.state.tx.us/animal_health/cwd/cwd.html

USGS National Wildlife Health Center: www.nwhc.usgs.gov/disease_information/chronic_wasting_disease/index.jsp

Department of Health & Human Services Center for Disease Control: www.cdc.gov/prions/cwd/index.html