

Chronic Wasting Disease Fact Sheet for Deer Hunters

Compiled by: Potato Creek State Park

Frequently Asked Questions about CWD

What is Chronic Wasting Disease?

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) is a serious neurological disease affecting elk, white-tailed and mule deer. Although it has been associated with captive deer and elk in the past, CWD has more recently been found in free-ranging white-tailed deer in the Midwest. This disease has been a serious concern for a number of western and plains states for the last several years and has now been found in free-ranging white-tailed deer in Wisconsin and Minnesota.

Although the methods of transmission are not completely known, evidence suggests that infected animals may transmit the disease by animal-to-animal contact or by environmental contamination. CWD is always fatal to the infected animal and there is no diagnostic test available to detect CWD in live animals.

Can people get chronic wasting disease from deer?

While CWD is related to other well-known diseases, such as scrapie in sheep, bovine spongiform encephalopathy (mad cow disease) and Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease in humans, public health officials have not found any evidence that CWD in deer or elk can be transmitted to humans.

What is the State of Indiana doing about CWD?

Currently CWD is not known to be present in Indiana. DNR biologists and Board of Animal Health (BOAH) veterinarians will be out in force during deer hunting season collecting samples for disease testing. They will collect around 3,000 deer heads from counties throughout the state. Samples will be sent to Purdue's Animal Disease Diagnostic Laboratory and other animal disease labs in the U.S. These labs will process samples over the next few months and report results to Indiana biologists. Many other states are conducting CWD monitoring programs this year.

The importation of all live cervid species (deer and elk) into Indiana has been suspended through May 1, 2003.

Where can hunters have deer tested?

Biologists will man deer check stations during peak periods of the archery and firearms deer hunting season. They will ask hunters to voluntarily donate the heads of deer for testing. Indiana Board of Animal Health researchers have established objectives for the number of deer to be collected from each of Indiana's 92 counties. Biologists won't be able to sample every deer. They will be actively seeking deer from counties throughout the state to get a statistically accurate sample.

Are there private CWD-testing facilities?

No. There are no private labs in the nation authorized to do CWD testing at this time.

Am I required to turn over the head of my deer?

No. Participation in the CWD monitoring program is optional. Hunters with "trophy" deer may not want to submit the head of their deer for testing. For those who want to keep the antlers, but do not need the rest of the head, biologists may be able to remove the skull cap at the check station.

Can I keep the antlers and provide the rest of the head of my deer?

Yes, if you only want to keep the skull cap. The biologist gathering samples will assist you in removing the skull cap. If you want to take maximum precaution, consider bagging the cap and antlers at the check station and soaking the cap in a strong chlorine bleach solution for a few hours when you get home. Prions, the abnormal protein that causes CWD, are most prevalent in brain tissue if an animal is infected.

How can I tell if the deer I harvested has CWD?

There is no way to tell if a deer is infected with CWD by appearance. DNR officials recommend that hunters not process or consume any deer that is obviously ill or emaciated.

If I provide the head of my deer for testing, when will I hear results?

If the deer you have harvested tests positive for CWD, you will be notified by mail. If your deer does not test positive for CWD, you will not receive notification, though you can get updates on the monitoring program at www.deerhealth.IN.gov.

Should I wait to eat the deer until I get test results?

This is a personal choice. There is no known connection between CWD in deer and any diseases in humans. Get updates on tests results at www.deerhealth.IN.gov.

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Chronic Wasting Disease Precautions for Deer Hunters

Stories have spread about hunters in Wisconsin and Colorado dying from brain diseases acquired from eating deer meat, leading many Hoosier deer hunters to question the safety of eating venison and fearing the risk of CWD. Indiana DNR biologists have no reason to believe that any animal in Indiana is infected with CWD, but cannot guarantee that any individual deer is disease free. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the United States Centers for Disease Control (CDC) agree that there currently is no evidence that humans can contract CWD either by handling or consuming infected deer. The WHO reports that, "there currently is no evidence that CWD in Cervidae (deer) is transmitted to humans." The CDC cautions that, "there is not yet strong evidence that such transmissions could not occur."

Information to consider in your decision

To aid you in making decisions about consumption of deer meat, DNR biologists offer the following points to consider:

- Contrary to some news stories, the CDC has not found any evidence of CWD in the three people in Wisconsin or three people in Colorado who ate venison and died of brain disease.
- DNR biologists have no reason to believe that any animal in Indiana is infected with CWD.
- The random sampling of deer in Indiana is being done to determine if the disease exists in the state. It is not being conducted due to human health concerns.
- DNR biologists do not recommend that hunters wait to eat venison until samples are analyzed.
- CWD has existed in parts of Colorado and Wyoming for about 20 years. No wildlife researchers who have handled infected animals have become infected.
- During the same 20 years, hunters have been consuming infected animals that had not advanced to the point where the symptoms were obvious. There have been no cases of CWD found in these hunters.
- At a national CWD convention in Denver in August 2002, speakers concurred that there is either no health risk of humans contracting CWD, or the risk is significantly less than the other risks that all hunters take when they go hunting (fatal car accidents, falls from tree stands, heart attacks, etc.).
- The Centers for Disease Control and the World Health Organization have no evidence that a person can get CWD from an infected deer.
- These agencies cannot absolutely guarantee that there will not be a first occurrence in the nation of someone catching CWD from infected deer.

As has always been the case, the decision to hunt and consume wild game must be made by the individual. Most DNR biologists and animal health experts, after weighing this information, will continue to process and eat deer that appear to be healthy just as they have in the past.

Reducing Risk

The risk of contracting any disease from handling deer or consuming venison is extremely low. There is no known connection between CWD in deer and any diseases in humans. If you would like to take maximum precaution, follow the guidelines below. These guidelines were developed for states where CWD has been identified. CWD is not known to exist in Indiana.

- Do not eat the eyes, brain, spinal cord, spleen, tonsils or lymph nodes of any deer.
- Do not eat any part of a deer that appears sick.

Field Dressing

- Wear rubber or latex gloves.
- Minimize contact with the brain, spinal cord, spleen and lymph nodes as you work. Lymph nodes are the lumps of tissue next to organs or in fat and membranes.
- Do not use household knives or utensils.
- Clean knives and equipment of residue and disinfect with a 50-50 solution of chlorine bleach and water. Soak knives for one hour.

Butchering

- Wear rubber or latex gloves.
- Minimize handling brain or spinal tissues. If removing antlers, use a saw designated for that purpose only and dispose of the blade.
- Do not cut the spinal cord except to remove the head. Use a knife designated only for this purpose.
- Bone out the meat and remove all fat and the weblike membranes attached to the meat. This will also remove lymph nodes.
- Dispose of hide, brain, spinal cord, eyes, spleen, tonsils, bones and head in a landfill or by other means available in your area.
- Thoroughly clean and sanitize equipment and work areas with bleach water after processing.