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Chronic Wasting Disease Overview

What is Chronic Wasting Disease? Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) is a neurological (brain and nervous system) disease found in deer, elk, and moose in certain geographic locations in North America. CWD belongs to a family of diseases known as transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSEs) or prion diseases; it attacks the brains of infected members of the deer family and produces small lesions that eventually result in death. While CWD is similar to mad cow disease in cattle and scrapie in sheep, there is no known relationship between it and any other TSE of animals or people.

How is it spread? While it's not known exactly how CWD is spread, it is believed that the agent responsible for the disease may be spread both directly (animal to animal contact), and indirectly (soil or other surface to animal), most likely through the saliva and feces of infected animals or decomposing carcasses.

Where has it been found? In October 2012, CWD was detected in a captive deer on a deer farm in Adams County. In addition, CWD has been detected in wild or captive deer and/or elk in Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Wisconsin, West Virginia, Wyoming, Alberta and Saskatchewan.


Is it dangerous to humans? There is no evidence that the agent of CWD affects humans. However, public health officials recommend that human exposure to the CWD agent be avoided as research into the disease continues.

How can I tell if a deer or elk has CWD? Infected animals may not show signs of the disease in the early stages, which can last for years. However, as the disease progresses, infected animals begin to lose body functions, and display abnormal behaviors, such as staggering or failing to respond to threats like the approach of humans or predators. Animals may stand with legs spread far apart, carry their head and ears lowered, and often drool excessively. Infected animals appear to be in poor body condition and some become emaciated. Infected animals are often found near water and drink large quantities. It is important to note that these symptoms are characteristic of diseases other than CWD and that is why the diagnosis comes only after death.

What should I do if I see a deer or elk displaying signs that suggest CWD? You should accurately document the location of the animal and immediately contact the nearest PGC Region Office. Do not attempt to disturb, kill or remove the animal.

Should I be concerned about hunting in Pennsylvania and elsewhere? CWD has not been detected in Pennsylvania's wild deer population. Hunters should continue to enjoy deer and elk hunting in Pennsylvania. However, with the discovery of CWD in a captive deer herd in Adams County, an [Executive Order](#) has been issued by the Pennsylvania Game Commission (PGC) to establish a Disease Management Area (DMA) in portions of [Adams and York counties](#). Within this DMA, feeding and rehabilitation of deer has been banned, as has the use of urine-based lures. Also, transportation out of the DMA of specific cervid carcass parts has been banned. If you plan to hunt in another state where CWD has been found (see list above), contact that state's wildlife agency for guidance.

What is being done to manage CWD in Pennsylvania? Several state and federal agencies, including the PGC, Pennsylvania departments of Agriculture (PDA), Health (PDH), and Environmental Protection (DEP), and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) completed a response plan which details methods of prevention, surveillance and response designed to manage [CWD](#). Several activities designed to reduce the risks associated with this disease are ongoing. Surveillance for CWD and other diseases has been ongoing in Pennsylvania since 1998 and no evidence of CWD has been found so far in wild deer and elk populations. The PGC continues to collect samples from deer and elk that appear sick or behave abnormally. The agency also tests more than 3,000 hunter-harvested deer annually and all hunter-harvested elk. Additionally, PDA has mandatory CWD monitoring program for captive cervids. Currently, more than 1,100 herds representing over 23,000 individual cervids participate in PDA's CWD Herd Certification Program or Herd Monitoring




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Program. Regulations associated with these programs may be found [here](#).

What can hunters do?

Although CWD has been detected in a captive cervid herd, our goal continues to be to prevent further introductions of CWD to our state, and also to prevent spread within the state. Knowing that CWD can be spread by contaminated deer and elk parts that are discarded on the landscape, the PGC issued an Executive Order prohibiting the importation of certain parts from cervids. These are the parts of the animals body most likely to have the most prions.

Specified parts banned from being brought into Pennsylvania by hunters include: head (including brain, tonsils, eyes and lymph nodes), spinal cord/backbone, spleen, skull plate with attached antlers if visible brain or spinal cord material is present, cape if visible brain or spinal cord material is present, upper canine teeth if root structure or other soft material is present, any object or article containing visible brain or spinal cord material, unfinished taxidermy mounts and brain-tanned hides. View the [PGC Cervid Parts Importation Ban](#). These specified parts are also the parts banned from being transported out of Pennsylvania's DMA.

The order does not limit the importation of the following animal parts originating from CWD-positive areas: meat without the backbone, skull plate with attached antlers if no visible brain or spinal cord material is present, tanned hide or raw hide with no visible brain or spinal cord material present, cape if no visible brain or spinal cord material is present, upper canine teeth if no root structure or other soft material is present, and finished taxidermy mounts. These parts are also allowed to be transported out of Pennsylvania's DMA.

What precautions should hunters take? Hunters should continue to shoot only healthy-appearing animals, and take usual precautions like wearing rubber gloves for field-dressing and washing thoroughly when finished. Hunters hunting in Pennsylvania's DMA or heading to a state with a history of CWD should become familiar with carcass parts transportation regulations in effect for those areas, and well as the PGC Cervid Parts Importation Ban (see above) for carcasses coming to Pennsylvania from other states. Wildlife officials have suggested that hunters in areas where CWD is known to exist follow these guidelines to prevent the spread of the disease:

- Do not shoot, handle or consume an animal that appears sick.
- Wear rubber or latex gloves when field-dressing.
- Bone out the meat from your animal.
- Minimize the handling of brain and spinal tissues.
- Wash hands and instruments after field dressing.
- Ask your deer processor to process your meat individually, without meat from other animals, or process your own meat
- Have your animal processed in the area of the state where it was harvested so high risk body parts can be properly disposed of. It is illegal to bring these parts into the state from areas listed in the PGC Parts ban, or to take them out of Pennsylvania's DMA.
- Transport out of Pennsylvania's DMA, or bring back to Pennsylvania only low-risk materials: meat without the backbone, skull plate with attached antlers if no visible brain or spinal cord material is present, tanned hide or raw hide with no visible brain or spinal cord material present, cape if no visible brain or spinal cord material is present, upper canine teeth if no root structure or other soft material is present, and finished taxidermy mounts. If you plan to hunt in CWD positive areas, and want to avoid transporting parts that are banned, take a moment to view this [video](#).
- Don't consume high-risk body parts. Normal field-dressing, coupled with boning out a carcass, will remove most, if not all, of these body parts. Cutting away all fatty tissue will remove remaining lymph nodes.
- Have your animal tested, and do not consume meat from any animal that tests positive for the disease.

Processors and Taxidermists

If you are presented with deer or elk body parts harvested by hunters in CWD-infected areas, please contact the nearest PGC Region Office for guidance. A PGC representative may want to collect tissues, provide proper processing and disposal procedures, and information to educate hunters. Here are fact sheets for processors and taxidermists.

[What Every Meat Processor Should Know About Chronic Wasting Disease \(CWD\)](#)
[What Every Taxidermist Should Know About Chronic Wasting Disease \(CWD\)](#)

Can hunters have deer tested?



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CWD testing of healthy appearing hunter harvested deer or elk is available through the Pennsylvania Veterinary Laboratory. Hunters who wish to have their deer tested can make arrangements to do so by calling 717-787-8808. Unhealthy appearing animals should not be killed, but reported to the PGC Region Office nearest you.

Is the meat safe to eat?

CWD is caused by abnormally shaped proteins, called prions. They accumulate in greatest numbers in certain parts of infected animals — the brain, eyes, spinal cord, lymph nodes, tonsils and spleen, but are also found in muscle. As a precaution, hunters are advised to not eat meat from animals known to be infected with CWD.

What else can hunters do?

Hunters need to communicate with political leaders indicating their support for increased financial assistance to state wildlife and agricultural agencies to combat CWD. Encourage state officials to support the important steps taken to manage CWD. And finally, because any concentration of deer or elk assists in the spread of diseases, stop supplemental feeding programs.

Where can I learn more?

Hunters are encouraged to contact state wildlife agencies where they plan to hunt for more information on the status of CWD in that state. Most states, including Pennsylvania, now have up-to-date information on CWD on their websites. The [Chronic Wasting Disease Alliance website](#) is also frequently updated with new information.

Pennsylvania Game Commission, 2001 Elmerton Ave, Harrisburg Pennsylvania 17110-9797

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