CWD – Questions and Answers

What is CWD – Chronic Wasting Disease?

CWD is a neurological (brain and nervous system) disease of deer and elk known to occur in limited geographical locations in North America. The disease belongs to a family of diseases known as transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSE). These diseases are caused by an abnormal form of a protein called a prion. While CWD is similar to mad cow disease in cattle and scrapie in sheep, there is no known relationship between CWD and any other TSE of animals or people. In deer and elk there is no practical test of live animals to detect CWD and there is no known treatment or vaccine.

How is it spread?

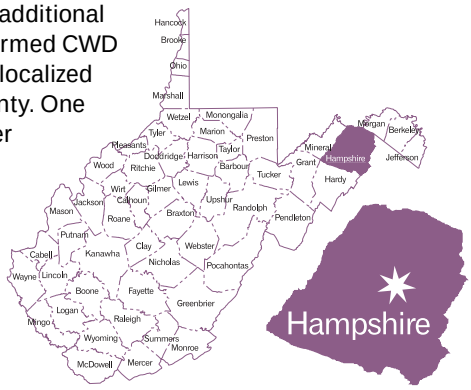
It is not known exactly how CWD is spread. Experimentally, the disease can be spread both directly (animal to animal contact) and indirectly (soil or other surface to animal). It is thought that the most common mode of transmission from an infected animal is via saliva, but feces and possibly other body secretions may transmit the infectious prion. There is evidence that people moving live infected animals have spread the disease over long distances.

Is it dangerous to humans?

There currently is no convincing evidence that the agent of CWD affects humans. However, public health officials recommend that human exposure to the CWD agent be avoided as they continue to research the disease. This includes not eating meat from known infected animals, or animals that appear sick, and avoid eating the brain, spinal cord, eyes, lymph nodes, spleen, and tonsils where the abnormal prion accumulates.

Where has it been found?

As of May 2007, CWD is known to infect free-ranging deer and elk in portions of Colorado, Illinois, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, South Dakota, Utah, Wisconsin, West Virginia, Wyoming, and Alberta and Saskatchewan, Canada. In addition, CWD has been found in captive/farmed elk and white-tailed deer in Colorado, Kansas, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, New York, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Wisconsin, and Alberta and Saskatchewan, Canada. CWD has been found in 13 white-tailed deer in West Virginia. The first deer was a road-kill in Hampshire County. An additional 12 deer have been confirmed CWD positive from the same localized area in Hampshire County. One of these deer was hunter harvested in 2006 and the remainder was collected by West Virginia Division of Natural Resources in cooperation with local landowners to monitor the disease.



What is being done about the recent discovery of CWD in WV?

The discovery of CWD in Hampshire County, West Virginia represents a significant threat to the state's white-tailed deer. The disease does not cause an immediate widespread die-off of deer but if allowed to spread will cause long-term damage to the herd. The WVDNR is taking immediate action to gather more information on the prevalence and distribution of the disease in the area surrounding the known infected deer. This goal will be accomplished by increasing the number of deer tested with the help of other state and federal agencies, and local landowners. To detect CWD that may be present in only a few animals, a large number of samples need to be tested. There are no proven solutions to combating CWD once present in free-ranging deer. Thus management actions will be adaptive and based on the findings of current and future surveillance.

How can you tell if a deer has CWD?

Infected animals may not show any symptoms of the disease. In some stages of the disease, however, infected animals begin to lose control of bodily functions and display abnormal behavior such as staggering or standing with very poor posture and lose fear of humans. Infected animals become very emaciated (thus wasting disease), appear in very poor body condition, and often stand in or near water and drink excessively. Drooling or excessive salivation may be apparent. However, these symptoms are not unique to CWD and are also characteristic of diseases other than CWD.

What can hunters do?

- If you kill a severely emaciated (very skinny) deer or a deer that is obviously sick contact the WV DNR Wildlife Resources Section office nearest you.
- Do not feed or bait deer. These practices concentrate deer, increase the likelihood of spread of any disease present in the deer herd, and may introduce foreign contaminates via the feed or bait.
- Harvest adequate numbers of antlerless deer to maintain deer populations in balance with natural food supplies. A deer population in balance with available habitat is healthier and better able to fight diseases.
- Use caution in spreading urine based lures in the environment and avoid placing deer lures on the ground or on vegetation where deer can reach them. Placing them out of reach of deer still allows air circulation to disperse the scent.
- If you plan to hunt deer or elk in a state known or suspected to harbor CWD follow that state's rules on removing animals from the area. Bring back only boned out meat and thoroughly cleaned skull plates and antlers.
- If you hunt in Hampshire County, see special regulations regarding carcass transport and disposal, and baiting and feeding on page 11. Also, please cooperate with WVDNR requests for information and samples needed for CWD testing.
- If you observe live deer or elk being transported in a truck or trailer notify your local DNR office as soon as possible.