

Chronic wasting disease (CWD) has been in the news lately because of its occurrence in free-ranging animals in Colorado, Nebraska, South Dakota, Wisconsin, Wyoming, New Mexico, and Saskatchewan. Research to date indicates that the main animals CWD affects are deer and elk. In response to these findings, importation of elk and several species of deer has been suspended in Texas.

Chronic wasting disease is probably not a zoonotic disease. In other words, there is no evidence that CWD can be passed from infected animals to humans. However, it holds some intrigue as it appears to be caused by a prion and belongs to an elusive family of diseases called spongiform transmissible encephalopathies. This group includes diseases that do affect humans, such as Creutzfeldt-Jacobs disease and kuru. Additionally, there are indications that another member of this group, bovine spongiform encephalopathy (better known as mad cow disease), may cause new variant Creutzfeldt-Jacobs disease in humans.

The mode of transmission of CWD appears to be lateral (from animal to animal); however, vertical maternal transmission to offspring may occur. An infected animal usually has a “wasting” syndrome, which can include weight loss over time, listlessness, lowering of the head, repeated walking in set patterns, blank facial expression, excessive salivation, teeth grinding, and possibly increased drinking and urination. It should be remembered, however, that a malnourished animal might not necessarily have CWD; it could be thin due to a reduced food supply caused by drought or overpopulation of animals. Rarely is a symptomatic animal seen in the wild; early in its debilitation, it becomes food for predators.

Although risk of exposure appears low, hunters handling animals for field dressing should wear latex gloves for a variety of public health reasons. The disease is located in an infected animal’s nervous tissue, such as the brain and spinal cord, plus in the eyes and lymph nodes. Avoid eating the brain, spinal cord, eyes, spleen, tonsils, and lymph nodes from any deer or elk. In other words, eat only muscle tissue from harvested animals. (At the present time, deer venison cannot be tested for CWD.) Additionally, do not harvest animals that appear to be sick; do not eat animals that had signs of CWD. Do not feed animals that had signs of CWD to other animals. Always thoroughly cook meat.

If you suspect that an animal has CWD, do not attempt to touch, disturb, kill, or remove it. If you are in a state or federal park, notify the park ranger. Otherwise, immediately contact the nearest Wildlife Division or Law Enforcement Division office of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) or call the TPWD headquarters in Austin toll-free at (800) 892-1112 (enter 5 for wildlife and 1 for general wildlife information). For more information on CWD, please refer to TPWD’s website at http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/hunt/chronic_wasting_disease/index.htm

Safe Hunting Tips

- Wear latex gloves when field dressing animals.
- Do not harvest animals that appear to be sick.
- Do not eat animals that had signs of CWD.
- Avoid eating the brain, spinal cord, eyes, spleen, tonsils, and lymph nodes from any deer or elk.
- Use proper sanitation techniques to avoid cross-contamination of meats being processed.
- Always thoroughly cook meat.
- Do not feed animals that had signs of CWD to other animals.