[dkpdf-button]

What is Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD)?

CWD is a prion disease that affects deer, elk, moose and similar animals in some areas of North America, including Canada and the United States, Norway, Finland, Sweden and South Korea. CWD has been found in deer in the northeastern part of Virginia. To date, there have been no reported cases of CWD infection in people, however, animal studies suggest CWD poses a risk to some types of non-human primates, like monkeys, that eat meat from CWD infected animals or come in contact with brain or body fluids from infected deer or elk. These studies raise concerns that there may also be a risk to people.

Who gets CWD?

The disease has not been shown to infect humans. However, CWD is related to another prion disease in animals that **does** infect people. So, it is considered a theoretical risk to people.

How is CWD spread?

Scientists believe CWD prions likely spread between animals through body fluids like feces, saliva, blood, or urine, either through direct contact or indirectly through environmental contamination of soil, food, or water. Once introduced into an area, the CWD protein is contagious within deer and elk populations and can spread quickly. Experts believe CWD prions can remain in the environment for a long time, so other animals can contract CWD from the environment even after an infected deer or elk has died.

What are the signs of CWD infection and how long does it take for signs to appear after exposure?

Clinical signs in affected animals can include severe weight loss (wasting), stumbling, and drooling, all of which may take over a year to develop. CWD can affect animals of all ages. It is always fatal in infected animals.

How is CWD diagnosed?

Brain and lymph node tissue from animals can be examined with a microscope using a special stain to identify the CWD prion. Visit the the Virginia DWR Resources page on chronic wasting disease at dwr.virginia.gov/wildlife/diseases/cwd for more information.

What is the treatment for CWD?

CWD is fatal to animals and there are no treatments or vaccines.

How can CWD infection be prevented?

Prevention of CWD in animals includes strategies such as lowering the density of certain animal populations, banning feeding or baiting of deer in areas with CWD, and prohibiting movement of certain animal carcasses out of an area where CWD has been found.

To date, there is no strong evidence for the occurrence of CWD in people and it is not known if people can get infected with CWD prions. Nevertheless, experimental studies raise the concern that CWD may pose a risk to people and suggest that it is important to prevent human exposures to CWD.

Additional studies are under way to identify if any prion diseases could be occurring at a higher rate in people who are at increased risk for contact with potentially CWD-infected deer or elk meat. Given the length of time it takes before symptoms of disease appear, scientists expect the study to take many years before a determination will be made on what risk, if any, CWD is to people.

How can I get more information about CWD?

- If you have concerns about CWD, contact your healthcare provider.
- Call your local health department. You can find your local health department at vdh.virginia.gov/health-department-locator/.
- Visit the Virginia DWR Resources page on chronic wasting disease at dwr.virginia.gov/wildlife/diseases/cwd.
- Visit the CDC's page on chronic wasting disease at cdc.gov/chronic-wasting/animals/.

Opens pdf to download

Opens document to download

Opens in a new window

External link will open in new window. Click link to exit Virginia Department of Health Website.