

What to Know About Chronic Wasting Disease

The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries continues to monitor and test the state's white-tailed deer herd for chronic wasting disease (CWD). It has not been detected in Louisiana but Texas, Arkansas, and Mississippi have documented the disease. Here are some facts about the disease:

What is Chronic Wasting Disease?

CWD is a neurodegenerative disease found in most deer species, including but not limited to white-tailed deer, mule deer, elk, red deer, moose, and caribou. It is infectious, always fatal, and there is no treatment. It's part of a group of diseases known as transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSEs) and is similar to BSE (mad cow disease) in cattle and scrapie in sheep. These diseases cause irreversible damage to brain tissue, which leads to excessive salivation, neurological symptoms, emaciation, and death of the animal.

Has it been found in Louisiana's white-tailed deer population?

CWD has not been detected in Louisiana. However, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Texas have recorded it. The disease has been documented in 25 states and two Canadian provinces. LDWF has been monitoring and testing for CWD for more than 15 years and has checked more than 8,320 deer during that period. The state has yet to detect a positive case.

What causes CWD and how is it spread?

CWD is caused by prions, which are proteins normally found in the body that have mutated. These prions accumulate in the brain and cause holes to develop in brain tissue. While prions are concentrated in the central nervous system, they can be found within other tissues of the infected animal, including muscle.

CWD is spread through direct deer-to-deer contact or through contact with urine, feces, saliva, and body parts of infected deer or infectious materials in the soil. Prions will bind to soil particles once an infected deer carcass has decomposed. Once in a location, the disease is present indefinitely.

What signs do deer with CWD display?

Prions can be shed within 6 months of infection, but it can take one to two years for CWD to incubate and exhibit outward symptoms in the infected animal. Symptoms include emaciation, lethargy, abnormal behavior, and loss of bodily functions. Other signs include excessive salivation, loss of appetite, progressive weight loss, excessive thirst and urination, teeth grinding, and drooping ears.

Can humans contract CWD?

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there is no evidence that CWD can infect humans. However, the CDC recommends caution in handling venison in the infected region and that deer be tested for CWD before consuming. CWD-positive deer should not be consumed by people.

How can I report a suspect deer?

You can assist LDWF in disease surveillance by reporting any deer that exhibits CWD symptoms. Suspect deer should be reported to the nearest LDWF regional office.

What is LDWF's plan of action should CWD be discovered in Louisiana?

If CWD is discovered in Louisiana, LDWF will create a management zone, the size of which will depend on the location and distribution of infected deer as well as the deer density, distribution, and seasonal movements of the local deer population. There will be feeding and baiting restrictions in the management zone where the disease is found. There also will be movement restrictions placed on deer body parts. Hunters will not be able to bring whole deer out from the management zone. They will be restricted to deboned meat, a clean skull cap with antlers, and the cape, which is the skin of head and shoulders. Any deer harvested within the management zone will be tested. LDWF will maintain intensive surveillance in the management zone for an indefinite period of time.