Indiana State Department of Health | Epidemiology Resource Center

Quick Facts

About Chronic Wasting Disease

What is chronic wasting disease?

Chronic wasting disease (CWD) is a disease of the nervous system of deer and elk. The disease is similar to a group of diseases referred to as transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSE). This group of diseases includes Scrapie of sheep, bovine spongiform encephalopathy (Mad Cow Disease) and Creutzfeldt - Jakob disease (CJD) of humans. The agents that cause these infections are called prions, an abnormal form of a naturally occurring nervous system protein.

The disease was first recognized in 1967 at a Colorado wildlife research facility. It has now been diagnosed in wild deer and elk in Colorado and Wyoming and in wild deer in Nebraska, South Dakota, Wisconsin, New Mexico, and Saskatchewan. It has also been found on elk farms in several states.

How is chronic wasting disease spread?

Transmission is not completely understood, but animal-to-animal contact is a likely route. It may be transmitted from doe to fawn. It is also possible that the disease may be transmitted in the environment , through contaminated soil and water.

Who is at risk for chronic wasting disease?

There is no evidence that this disease has been transmitted to people. There have been several reports of suspected human cases; however, investigation of those cases revealed other nervous system diseases, not chronic wasting disease.

What are the symptoms of chronic wasting disease in deer and elk?

CWD is a disease of the brain. Animals with CWD will display abnormal behavior, develop chronic weight loss, and die. Signs include listlessness, lowering of the head, blank facial expression, teeth grinding, loss of appetite, drooping ears, and repetitive walking in set patterns. CWD is a slow, progressive disease and is usually not seen until the animal is 18 months or older.

How can chronic wasting disease be treated?

Once an animal has CWD it cannot be treated.

How is chronic wasting disease prevented?

The risk of humans contracting CWD is considered low; however, any animal showing signs of illness should not be eaten. To reduce the risk, brain, eyeballs, spinal cord, spleen, or lymph nodes from healthy appearing deer and elk should not be consumed. See links below for more detailed instructions on safely dressing and preparing venison.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to:

http://www.in.gov/dnr/fishwild/2886.htm

http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/cwd/

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