What is Chronic Wasting Disease?

Chronic wasting disease (CWD) is a neurological disease that affects deer, elk, moose, reindeer and caribou, animals in the cervid family. It is a slow, progressive disease that causes characteristic spongy degeneration in the brain of an infected animal.

CWD belongs to a group of diseases known as transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSEs). There are no vaccines or treatments for TSEs, and they are always fatal. TSEs are believed to be caused by prions, which are abnormal proteins that self-replicate within an infected animal. Prions are highly resistant to disinfectants, heat or freezing. It can incubate for 1½ to 3 years before clinical signs begin to appear. This means that older deer, males in particular due to their rutting behavior which increases deer interactions, have the highest infection risk.

CWD was first recognized in a captive mule deer at a wildlife research facility in Colorado in the late 1960s. CWD has been detected in wild and/or captive animals across 26 states, three Canadian provinces, South Korea, Finland, Norway and Sweden.

It can be spread from both direct (animal-to-animal) and indirect (environmental) contact with infected deer. Prions are shed through saliva, urine, blood, feces and antler velvet. Additionally, carcass parts from a dead infected deer can serve as a source of further infection to other deer in the area. By concentrating deer on the landscape through artificial feeding, or by providing attractants such as salt licks, humans can increase the likelihood of both direct and indirect contact.

The Wisconsin DNR website provides a list of places to dispose of deer and other animal carcasses to help limit the spread of CWD and discourage hunters from leaving any carcasses in the woods. Hunters in Wisconsin can submit a sample of their deer for CWD testing through many different testing sites, locations available [by following this link](https://dnr.wi.gov/wmcwd/RegStation/Search), https://dnr.wi.gov/wmcwd/RegStation/Search. According to the CDC, to date, there have been no reported cases of CWD infection in people, though it is discouraged to eat meat of animals that have tested positive for CWD.

