

BC CHRONIC WASTING DISEASE PROGRAM

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is Chronic Wasting Disease?

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) is a neurological disease that affects species the deer family (cervids), including deer, elk, moose and caribou. The disease is caused by abnormal proteins (called prions) that accumulate in tissues, most significantly in the brain. There is no vaccine or treatment – the disease is always fatal.

Has Chronic Wasting Disease been detected in B.C.?

No. CWD has not been detected B.C. Surveillance of wild deer, elk, moose and caribou that has been ongoing since 2002 with no cases to date. However, with continued spread in neighbouring jurisdictions and recent detections of the disease near the B.C.-Alberta and B.C.-Montana border, the risk of CWD in B.C. has increased significantly. CWD risk for B.C. is based on proximity to cases in free ranging and farmed cervids and the potential for import of CWD infected carcasses or contaminated materials (hay, scents).

What does Chronic Wasting Disease look like?

An infected animal may not show any symptoms until several months or years after infection. In late stages of the disease symptoms include weight loss (wasting), poor coordination, stumbling, drooling, increased drinking, and urination – but these symptoms are rarely seen in animals in the wild. This delay in visible symptoms means that healthy-looking animals can have and transmit CWD.

How is Chronic Wasting Disease transmitted and spread?

An infected animal will shed infectious proteins (prions) through though urine, feces, and saliva. CWD prions may also enter the environment via infected carcasses, tissues, or contaminated material such as hay or urine-based scents. Animals are exposed to the disease by direct animal-to-animal contact or contact with a contaminated environment. The disease can then be spread by natural animal movement or human movement of infected animals, animal parts and/or contaminated materials.

How would Chronic Wasting Disease come to B.C.?

The disease could enter B.C. by live infected animals, as cases have been detected in free ranging cervids within the natural range of animals moving between B.C. and neighbouring jurisdictions. Human activities could also bring CWD to B.C. Importing harvested animals, cervid products (scents) or contaminated hay/feed from areas affected by CWD could introduce the disease to B.C. The added risk of human import is that the disease could be introduced anywhere in B.C., not just the target areas where most of the surveillance is happening.

Is Chronic Wasting Disease the same as “Mad Cow” or BSE?

Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy or BSE (in cattle), Scrapie (in sheep) and CWD (in cervids) are all caused by abnormal proteins (prions) and belong to a family of diseases called Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies or TSEs – but they are very different diseases.

Is there a risk to humans or livestock?

We don't know for sure. There is no evidence that CWD can be transmitted to humans or livestock, however there is still a lot which is unknown about prion diseases, so it is strongly recommended that CWD infected animals are not eaten.

Is there a risk to food security and access to traditional foods?

Yes. Because of the unknown risk to humans, public health advises that infected animals should not be eaten. The choice of whether to consume an infected animal is a personal choice, but many follow public health advice and dispose of the meat. This is concerning for subsistence hunters.

What is B.C. doing about Chronic Wasting Disease?

The B.C. CWD Program is focused on prevention and reducing risk through proactive management, use of regulatory tools and outreach to increase awareness. Surveillance is also an important tool of disease prevention and management. Surveillance is required to confirm B.C.'s CWD status, to ensure the disease is detected as early as possible and to provide important information for a response to a positive diagnosis. The B.C. CWD Program has enhanced its surveillance efforts in the high-risk areas including a 10-fold increase in sample numbers to confirm disease status. These enhanced efforts will continue and adapt as the situation in B.C. evolves. B.C. has an active CWD team that includes a Provincial CWD Advisory committee and Regional CWD working groups. This team includes First Nations, stakeholders, government staff, CWD experts, academics, and other agency partners.

Is there mandatory submission for testing?

Submission of samples (cervid heads) is voluntary in most parts of the B.C. In 2021, a new hunting licence condition was put in place that requires licenced hunters to submit mule deer and white-tailed deer heads harvested in high-risk areas. The mandatory zone for the 2023 hunting season will include Wildlife Management Units 4-1 through 4-8 and 4-23 to 4-25. This mandatory zone may expand or shift with new information and evolving risks.

Why did the Province implement mandatory submission for testing?

Recent detections of CWD near the B.C. border have increased the CWD risk in specific regions of B.C. Adequate sample sizes in these areas are required to provide confidence in B.C.'s CWD status. Testing and surveillance are needed to detect the disease as soon as possible and to inform an effective response plan.

What about moose and elk in the mandatory zone?

Hunters are encouraged to voluntarily submit elk and moose from the mandatory management units, but this is not required under the hunting licence condition. Most cases of CWD in Alberta and Montana are detected in white-tailed and mule deer, so these are the priority species for testing.

What about animals harvested outside of the mandatory zone?

Hunters are encouraged to voluntarily submit harvested deer, elk, and moose from all regions of B.C. for testing. The Kootenay and Peace Regions are target areas for testing because these areas are at higher risk based on proximity to positive cases outside of B.C. Other areas of B.C. where testing has been limited are also vulnerable and more samples are needed.

Do heads need to be submitted within the region the animal was harvested in?

Hunters are asked to submit heads at one of the designated freezer locations before leaving the region. This is encouraged to facilitate timely sampling and turnaround on results. There is also a risk associated with transporting carcasses that could introduce the disease to new areas.

Where are the drop off locations?

Several drop off locations have been established in the Kootenay, Peace, Thompson, Okanagan, and Vancouver Island Regions. A complete list of drop off locations can be found on the B.C. CWD website: www.gov.bc.ca/chronicwastingdisease

What documents are required for submitting a head for testing?

Hunters are asked to complete ear cards provided at the drop off location. The hunter's contact information and general harvest location are the most important pieces of information. Once completed, ear cards are to be attached to the head with zap straps provided.

How long do hunters have to submit their head?

Hunters are asked to submit the head within one week of harvest to ensure integrity of samples and reasonable turnaround time on results.

Can hunters keep the antlers?

Yes. Hunters are encouraged to remove the antlers before submitting the head. The tissues required for CWD testing are at the back of the throat and base of the skull. Antlers can be removed with the skull plate or at the base of the antlers. For a European style mount, the lower jaw, throat, and neck can be submitted for CWD testing (for deer only).

What is the procedure for submitting samples?

Detailed instructions can be found on the website: www.gov.bc.ca/chronicwastingdisease and at every freezer location. In general, the following is requested:

- Complete ear card and attach to the head (not the outside bag) with a zap strap
- Place head with ear card into provided garbage bag and tie off
- Place garbage bag into freezer

What is a good sample?

Submitting a good quality sample will reduce the possibility of an inconclusive CWD result. A good sample has the following qualities:

- Fresh, not rotten
- Animal is over one year of age
- Minimal head trauma – preferably not shot in head
- Includes tissues at the back of the throat and base of skull
- Includes hunter contact and location information

Is there a cost for submitting a head for testing?

There is no cost to the hunter for submitting a head for testing.

Who pays for the B.C. Chronic Wasting Disease Program?

Program costs are managed by the B.C. Government, however significant in-kind and financial contributions have been made by internal and external partners.

When will hunters receive their Chronic Wasting Disease result?

Turnaround time for results in the target areas is 4-8 weeks from time of submission. Testing in other areas will be carried out as soon as possible but may be delayed as sampling occurs less frequently due to lack of capacity.

How will hunters be informed of their Chronic Wasting Disease result?

If a positive result is found, the hunter will be contacted directly and immediately. Negative results will be posted to the website: www.gov.bc.ca/chronicwastingdisease

What will happen if a hunter's animal tests positive for Chronic Wasting Disease?

If a positive result is found, the hunter will be contacted directly and immediately. An investigation will be carried out to determine the location of the meat and carcass parts. The hunter will be advised to not consume the meat (based on public health recommendations) and arrange for proper disposal.

If a hunter ends up with an animal that tests positive, will they be legally obliged to turn in the meat?

No. It is the hunter's choice to turn in the meat of a CWD positive animal. It is strongly recommended that the meat is not eaten and is turned in so that it can be properly disposed of in a licensed incineration facility or designated landfill. Proper disposal is critical to avoid environmental contamination.

If a hunter's sample is positive, will they get another tag to replace the diseased animal?

Not at this time.

Will the mandatory submission under the hunting licence condition be enforced?

The Conservation Officer Service can enforce the hunting licence condition under the B.C. *Wildlife Act*.

What can be done if Chronic Wasting Disease is present in a free-ranging deer population?

Once the disease is present in a free-ranging population, effective management strategies are limited and focus on preventing spread and maintaining low disease prevalence. Eradication is unlikely unless the disease is detected very early. CWD experts recommend harvest management strategies to target both animals most likely to be infected and situations most likely to increase transmission rates. Regulatory requirements for transport and disposal are also recommended to prevent spread and minimize exposure to healthy animals.

What will happen if Chronic Wasting Disease is detected in B.C.?

The Provincial CWD Advisory committee and Regional CWD Working group will be assembled to deliver a coordinated response, as outlined in the *Surveillance and Response Plan for Chronic Wasting Disease in B.C.* First Nations, stakeholders and other partners will be integral to the decision-making process.

What can be done to protect B.C. cervid populations from CWD?

Prevention is the best strategy. Reduce risk of introduction by increasing awareness and following regulations and recommendations. Support surveillance to ensure CWD is detected as early as possible for the best chance of containing it and limiting further spread.

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