

# CHRONIC WASTING DISEASE (CWD)

## FACT SHEET

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) is a progressive neurological, debilitating disease that belongs to a family of diseases known as Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies (TSEs), or prion diseases. The most obvious and consistent clinical sign of CWD is weight loss over time leading to death. There is no evidence that CWD is a risk to human health.

CWD attacks the brains of infected deer or elk, causing the animals to become emaciated, display abnormal behavior, lose bodily functions and subsequently die. Clinical signs include excessive salivation and grinding of teeth, increased drinking and urination, dramatic loss of weight and body condition, poor hair coat, staggering, and finally death. Behavioral changes, including decreased interaction with other animals in the open, listlessness, lowering of the head, blank facial expression, and repetitive walking in set patterns within the pen, also occur in the majority of cases. Behavioral changes in elk may also include hyper excitability and nervousness. Affected animals continue to eat grain but may show decreased interest in hay.

The origin and mode of transmission of CWD is unknown, but thought to be lateral from animal to animal. Unlike the cattle and sheep forms of the disease (bovine spongiform encephalopathy or BSE and scrapie), there are no statistics that would link CWD to animal feed contaminated by insufficiently treated material from other animals.

Research is currently being conducted to develop a live animal diagnostic test for CWD. Currently, however, definitive diagnosis is based only on necropsy examination and testing of brain stem material.

There is no known treatment and the disease is typically fatal. Because there is no live animal test, and because CWD is a chronic disease that develops slowly over months or years, herds must be monitored for at least five years before they are considered "free" of CWD. Herd monitoring involves examining brain tissue from every deer or elk in the herd that dies, either from slaughter, natural death, or hunter harvest to determine if the animal had the disease.

In the past, CWD has been detected in eight (8) states in both captive and free-ranging elk, white-tail deer, black-tail deer and mule deer. CWD has been diagnosed in farmed elk herds in Colorado, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and South Dakota. Additionally, the disease has been found in free-ranging deer and elk in Colorado and Wyoming; and in free-ranging deer in Nebraska, South Dakota and, most recently, in Wisconsin. However, it is the recent detection of CWD in the wild white-tail deer population in Wisconsin that is of particular concern to Florida. This was the first time the disease was detected east of the Mississippi River. Additionally, white-tail deer appear more susceptible than mule deer and elk to CWD with a greater percentage of the herd becoming infected. Wisconsin is now engaged in a deer eradication program within a 300—square mile area where CWD has been detected.