



# Chronic Wasting Disease

## What is Chronic Wasting Disease?

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) is a fatal brain disease that affects the behavior and physical condition of cervids, the group of mammals that includes deer, moose, and elk. This disease has not been documented in Rhode Island; however, surveillance for the disease is ongoing and essential to the health of our deer herd.

CWD is transmitted among individual cervids by a protein called a prion. Prions spread through physical or environmental contact with urine, blood, feces, or saliva. Nose-to-nose contact, decaying carcasses, and contact through contamination of soil, food, or water can all cause the spread of CWD. Prions may persist in the soil even after a carcass has decomposed.

## Where is CWD found?

CWD has not been documented in Rhode Island, but has been confirmed in a number of states and Canadian provinces. For a detailed and current map, click here: <https://www.usgs.gov/centers/nwhc/science/expanding-distribution-chronic-wasting-disease>

## What are the symptoms of CWD in deer?

- Poor body condition with ribs showing and drooping ears and head.
- Excessive drooling and thirst; sick deer may be found close to water.
- May also walk repetitive courses, have sluggish behavior, and isolate itself from the herd.

## Is there risk to humans who consume venison from a deer with CWD?

Hunters have been eating deer from the infected areas of Colorado and Wyoming for more than 30 years. There has never been a verified case of someone contracting the human variant from exposures to CWD. However, there has not been significant research to conclude humans are immune.

Research shows that the disease accumulates only in certain parts of infected animals – the brain, eyes, spinal cord, lymph nodes, tonsils, and spleen. Based on these findings, hunters are recommended to bone out their animals and consume only muscle tissue from animals harvested in CWD areas. If a deer tests positive for CWD, it is advised to not eat the meat.

## DO NOT FEED OR BAIT DEER

It is illegal and poses a threat to deer by increasing the chance of disease. Feeding any wildlife species, either directly or indirectly, can generate artificially high densities which increases the potential for disease spread through infected feed and/or close contact among individuals. It also decreases an animal's natural fear of humans, which can result in dangerous situations for both people and wildlife. Additionally, feeding wildlife food that is outside of their natural diet can cause health issues for wildlife, some of which can be fatal. Feeding deer can also cause them to congregate, which can lead to increased disease transmission.

## How is RI monitoring for CWD?

Our surveillance goal is to obtain fresh tissue samples from harvested or dead deer in all areas of Rhode Island. We will target samples that include hunter harvested deer, any “sick” deer reported, and road kills. Tissue Samples will be collected from recently harvested deer taken to state operated biological deer check stations by extracting and removing the retropharyngeal lymph nodes from the neck of the deer. Removal of the lymph nodes will not damage meat. Samples are collected only from adult and yearling deer. Fawns (button bucks or does) will not be tested. Samples will also be collected from butchers and taxidermists throughout the state during the fall deer seasons. Hunter cooperation and assistance is vital to our success and we appreciate your cooperation! Hunters wishing to have a deer tested for CWD should contact RIDEM Division of Fish and Wildlife to submit a sample. We require the hunter’s name, harvest date, and location of harvest.

## What should I do if I see a sick deer?

We ask the public to report any sick deer (poor body condition with ribs showing, drooping head and ears and excessive drooling) immediately to the RIDEM Division of Fish and Wildlife at (401) 789-0281. Office hours are Monday-Friday, 8:30 am – 4:00 pm. For afterhours calls, contact the RIDEM Division of Law Enforcement at 401-222-3070. Do not attempt to touch, disturb, kill, or remove the animal.

## Recommendations for Hunters

- Wear latex or rubber gloves. Bone all meat. Don’t saw through bone.
- Disinfect butchering equipment (knives, saws) with a 50/50 solution of chlorine bleach (household bleach works well).
- Commercial operators should bone the deer, and keep your meat separate from other deer. Lymph glands should be removed prior to grinding the meat.
- If you use a saw to remove the antlers, it should be cleaned and disinfected afterwards. This saw should not be used on any other part of the carcass. If you keep the entire skull (for a European mount), you should ensure that all meat and brain matter is removed, wear rubber or latex gloves while doing this, and soak the head in chlorine bleach.
- Bones, hides and waste should be double bagged in strong garbage bags and disposed of at a landfill with an approved dead animal pit, or buried.
- Minimize the handling of brain and spinal tissues.
- Avoid consuming brain, spinal cord, eyes, spleen, tonsils and lymph nodes of harvested animals
- Donate your harvested deer’s head for CWD testing. Call (401) 789-0281.

## Regulations for the Possession or Importation of Deer Parts

For a detailed list of regulations, visit: <https://rules.sos.ri.gov/regulations/part/250-60-00-2>

No person shall import, transport, or possess in Rhode Island a cervid whole carcass, brain, eyes, spinal cord, lymph nodes, tonsils, spleen, or such carcass parts from wild, captive or captive-bred cervid obtained from outside Rhode Island, except that:

- All legally harvested wild white-tailed deer carcasses and carcass parts from Connecticut and Massachusetts. All carcasses and carcass part must be disposed of following best management practices as stated by the Department at time of disposal. If Massachusetts or Connecticut become a CWD endemic area (any US State, Canadian Province or other Country where CWD has ever been detected or any State/Province located within 25 miles of any CWD positive detection in a different State/Province.), they are no longer exempt from the carcass or carcass parts ban beginning on the date of CWD detection.
- The following carcass parts originating from outside the State of Rhode Island may be imported and possessed if marked (full regulations in link):
  - Meat may be imported and possessed provided that all such meat from an individual animal shall be boned, cut up, packaged and wrapped and such meat shall not be commingled with the meat of any other;
  - The hide or cape;
  - The skull or skull cap, cleaned of all blood, brain matter, muscle or any other tissue;
  - The antlers;
  - Finished taxidermy;
  - Tanned hides;
  - The upper canine;

## QUESTIONS?

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