

Chronic Wasting Disease and traditional foods



Traditional food has significant nutritional, social, cultural and spiritual value, and is an important part of food security for Indigenous peoples. Indigenous knowledge and dietary studies show that eating traditional foods, even in small amounts, provides important nutritional benefits.

Traditional foods influence much more than health. They are closely linked to culture, identity, way of life, and overall health and well-being.

If you hunt, handle, or eat traditional foods like deer, elk, caribou, or moose, it is important to know about chronic wasting disease.

What is chronic wasting disease?

Chronic wasting disease (CWD) is a disease of the brain and nervous system that affects white-tailed deer, mule deer, moose, elk, red deer, and reindeer.

CWD belongs to the family of diseases known as transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSEs). While it shares features with similar diseases that affect cattle and sheep, CWD is only known at this time to naturally affect members of the deer (cervid) family. CWD is fatal to these animals.

Is CWD a risk to human health?

There are no known cases of human CWD. However, as a precaution, it is recommended that any part of a known CWD-infected animal not be used or consumed by humans.

Myth: People should not eat deer, elk, caribou or moose meat because of chronic wasting disease.

Fact: Deer, elk, caribou and moose meat is safe to eat and most body parts are safe to use. However, do not handle or eat any part of an animal that looks sick, has died from unknown causes, or has tested positive for CWD.

Always use care in handling the carcass of any animal.

What are the signs of CWD in animals?

Animals with CWD may show a number of signs as the disease slowly damages their brain. Some of these are very hard to detect.

Signs may include:

- » unusual behaviour
- » lack of coordination
- » listlessness
- » trouble swallowing
- » drooling
- » increased thirst
- » paralysis
- » pneumonia
- » separation from the other animals in the herd
- » excessive urination
- » unusual thinness



Signs can last for weeks to months before the animal dies; however, some animals may never show any signs of the disease.



Where is CWD found?

CWD has only been found in captive and wild members of the deer family in North America, the Republic of Korea, Norway, Sweden and Finland.

In Canada, CWD was first detected on a Saskatchewan elk farm in 1996. The disease has been detected in parts of Saskatchewan and Alberta and, more recently, on a red deer farm in Quebec.

How is CWD diagnosed?

The only way to confirm that an animal is infected with CWD is to test a body part (usually the brain) after it is dead. A negative test result does not guarantee that an animal is not infected with CWD, but it does make it considerably less likely and may reduce your risk of exposure.

How can I reduce the risk?

If you hunt, handle, or eat deer, elk, caribou or moose, there are things you can do to reduce the possibility that you will be exposed to CWD.

- » Before going out to hunt, check with the provincial or territorial wildlife management office where you live or hunt to identify areas where CWD is known to occur.

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» Pay attention to the appearance and behaviour of the animals you are hunting. Do not kill an animal that appears to be sick. Never handle or eat an animal that has died from unknown causes.

» Avoid handling or eating a deer, elk, moose or caribou that acts abnormally, looks sick, is found dead, or has tested positive for CWD.

» Avoid handling or eating the animal's brain, spinal cord, eyes, spleen, tonsils or lymph nodes. (Normal field dressing together with boning out a carcass will remove most, if not all, of these body parts. Cutting away all fatty tissue will remove remaining lymph nodes.)

» When handling the carcass, wear latex or rubber gloves. If you use parts of the carcass to tan the hide, minimize handling of the animal's head and brain.

» Wash hands and tools thoroughly with soap and water after field dressing is completed. Tools can then be disinfected with bleach.

» If the animal carcass is from an area of Saskatchewan or Alberta where CWD is known to occur, it is recommended that you have it tested for CWD. Wait for a negative result before any parts of the animal are used or eaten. The provincial or territorial wildlife management office where you live or hunt can give you information on how to have a carcass tested. Testing may be free of charge in your area.

For more information on testing:

- » [Alberta](#)
- » [British Columbia](#)
- » [Manitoba](#)
- » [Northwest Territories](#)
- » [Ontario](#)
- » [Quebec](#)
- » [Saskatchewan](#)
- » [Yukon](#)

Appropriate transportation and disposal is also important to help reduce the spread of CWD. Contact your provincial or territorial wildlife management office for more information on how to transport carcasses and dispose of animal parts you won't use.

Related links

[CFIA: Chronic wasting disease \(CWD\) of deer and elk](#)

[Tips on food safety when hunting](#)

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