



Chronic Wasting Disease in Montana

Frequently Asked Questions

New in 2023

This year FWP will continue CWD surveillance in specific areas known as Priority Surveillance Areas in north-central, southwestern, south-central, and eastern Montana.

- Carcass disposal requirements: Carcass parts, such as brain, eyes, spleen, lymph glands, and spinal cord material, should be left at the kill site when possible. If the animal is transported for taxidermy or meat processing, the brain and spinal tissue must be bagged and disposed of in a Class II landfill. A carcass may be transported within the state regardless of where it was harvested if the carcass parts are disposed of in a landfill after butchering and processing. Dumping carcasses is illegal, unethical, and can spread diseases, including chronic wasting disease. This requirement applies to all deer, elk, and moose carcasses wherever in the state they are harvested by hunters or as vehicle-killed salvage. [Protect our herds: properly dispose of carcasses.](#)
- If you intend to use scents to either mask human odor or as an attractant for deer and elk, you should be aware there are regulations on which ones you can use. You are safest if you use artificial scents, but you can also use scents certified by the Responsible Hunting Scent Association. You can identify these with the DPP✓ or RtQUIC✓ labels on them.
- Sample submission is voluntary throughout Montana. If hunters want their harvested animal sampled, they can submit samples themselves by following steps on the [Montana CWD Submission Guide](#) or by visiting a [CWD Sampling Station](#).
- Certain areas of the state are designated as [Priority Surveillance Areas](#) where FWP is making a concerted effort to gather more samples. In those specific areas, hunters are asked to voluntarily submit a sample from their animal. For instructions on how or where to submit a sample, visit fwp.mt.gov/cwd.
- Report sick-looking deer, elk, or moose. If you shoot an animal that looks diseased or sick, report it immediately to your local FWP office for further instructions and limit handling it. FWP staff will need to diagnosis and verify diseased or sick harvested animals to determine if an animal is fit for consumption or eligible for a replacement tag.

General Overview

What is chronic wasting disease (CWD)?

CWD is a 100 percent fatal disease that infects members of the deer family, including elk, moose, mule deer, and white-tailed deer. CWD is not a virus, bacteria, or fungus. It is caused by infectious, mis-folded proteins, called prions, that spread throughout the animal and result in organ damage and eventual death. These prions are found throughout bodily tissues and secretions and are shed into the environment before and after death. When other animals come in contact with the prions, either from infected animals or from contaminated environments, they can be infected. CWD does not appear to naturally infect cattle or other domesticated animals. The disease is slow acting, degenerative, and always fatal. The name comes from the appearance of symptomatic animals, which get very skinny and sick-looking before they die. There is no vaccine or cure for CWD. Symptoms of CWD typically take 16 to 24 months to develop. Therefore, most hunter-harvested animals that test positive do not exhibit obvious symptoms or characteristics of the disease when harvested.

Can humans be infected by CWD?

There is no known transmission of CWD to humans. However, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that hunters harvesting a deer, elk, or moose from an area where CWD is known to be present have their animal tested for CWD prior to consuming the meat, and to not consume the meat if the animal tests positive.

Some simple precautions should be taken when field dressing harvested animals:

- Wear rubber gloves and eye protection.
- Minimize the handling of brain and spinal tissues.
- Wash hands and instruments thoroughly after field dressing is completed. Instruments should be washed in a 40 percent bleach solution for 5 minutes.
- Avoid processing and consuming brain, spinal cord, eyes, spleen, tonsils, and lymph nodes of harvested animals. (Normal field dressing coupled with boning out a carcass will essentially remove these parts.)

Where does CWD come from?

The origin of CWD is unknown. It was discovered in 1967 in mule deer at a research facility in Colorado. Shortly thereafter it was also found in captive mule deer and elk in Ontario, Colorado, and Wyoming. By the 1990s, it was discovered in wild white-tailed deer, mule deer, elk, and moose in Colorado and Wyoming, and among captive animals in Saskatchewan, South Dakota, Montana, and Oklahoma. As of 2023, it has been found in captive or free-ranging herds in 31 states, four Canadian provinces, Norway, Finland, Sweden, and South Korea.

How did CWD get to Montana?

CWD was found among wild deer in Montana in 2017. CWD infections along our northern and southern borders are likely the result of the natural spread of the disease from Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Wyoming to Montana. Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Wyoming have documented CWD-positive deer close to Montana's border. CWD is also found in neighboring North Dakota, South Dakota, and Idaho.

Can CWD be eradicated?

After decades of CWD management across the country, most agencies and researchers agree that CWD cannot be eradicated once it infects a herd. Other states have attempted eradication and set unreasonable expectations with hunters and the public. Eradication is not the goal of FWP.

How does CWD spread?

Scientists believe CWD prions likely spread between animals through bodily fluids like feces, saliva, blood, or urine, either through direct contact or indirectly through environmental contamination of soil, food, or water. Once introduced into an area, the CWD protein is contagious within deer and elk populations and can spread quickly. Experts believe CWD prions can remain in the environment for a long time, so other animals can contract CWD from the environment even after an infected deer or elk has died. Feeding wildlife such as deer is illegal and can congregate animals and lead to the rapid spread of disease.

Management

How could CWD impact Montana's deer and elk herds?

If CWD infects enough animals, it could reduce the herd in the long term. Other states have seen deer populations decline when CWD infects 20 to 40 percent of a herd. In Wyoming, heavily infected herds of mule deer declined 21 percent per year and white-tailed deer declined by 10 percent. Colorado saw a 45 percent decline in infected mule deer herds over 20 years.

Because the distribution and intensity of CWD infections are variable across a broad landscape, the impacts across the landscape will also be variable. Keeping deer numbers down and deer dispersed, and reducing buck:doe ratios, may keep the prevalence low and manageable. FWPs' focus will be on managing CWD-infected areas for prevalence at 5 percent or lower and preventing spread. This may also mean keeping deer or elk numbers low to slow infection rates.

Where has CWD been found in Montana?

CWD was first found in the wild in October 2017. To view a map of where CWD has been found in Montana, visit fwp.mt.gov/cwd.

What is Montana doing to manage CWD?

FWP conducts annual chronic wasting disease surveillance in high priority areas known as Priority Surveillance Areas across large swaths of the state. See our map [here](#) for the latest Priority Surveillance Areas.

Hunters who harvest a deer, elk, or moose in these areas are asked to voluntarily submit their animal for sampling to gather additional data for that area. This information will be used to help inform the best management strategies for the affected hunting districts. FWP is asking hunters to properly dispose of their carcass waste in a landfill to help prevent the spread of the disease.

FWP also has begun to liberalize harvest (by either increasing total tags or either sex/antlered tags) in certain CWD-positive hunting districts, with the goal of reducing herd densities and mule deer buck densities. Mule deer bucks are more likely to be CWD positive than does. In the fall of 2022, FWP conducted CWD surveillance and monitoring in northcentral, southwestern, southcentral, and east-central Montana. FWP organized a third annual special CWD management hunt in southwestern Montana in 2022 in response to the high prevalence of CWD detected there. In addition, FWP conducted a fourth annual special CWD management hunt in the Libby CWD Management Zone and continued to trap and euthanize white-tailed deer within the town of Libby as part of an effort to reduce deer densities and help control CWD within the surrounding Libby CWD Management Zone. In collaboration with the Libby City Council, FWP also completed a CWD and urban deer management plan for the town of Libby.

What can I do to help with CWD?

Hunting is the primary tool for monitoring and managing the spread of CWD. Concerns over CWD shouldn't stop you from enjoying hunting season. Hunters are critical to conservation efforts across the state and protecting our wildlife heritage.

Proper carcass disposal is critical to protecting our herds. All carcass parts, such as brain, eyes, spleen, lymph glands, and spinal cord material should be bagged and disposed of in a landfill or may be left at the kill site. Dumping carcasses is illegal, unethical, and can spread diseases, including chronic wasting disease. This requirement applies to all deer, elk, and moose carcasses wherever in the state they are harvested by hunters or as vehicle-killed salvage.

Can hunters take harvested animals out of Montana or bring them into Montana?

To guard against importing CWD from other states, Montana regulates the transportation of hunter-harvested deer, elk, and moose from CWD-infected states. It is illegal to bring into Montana the whole carcass of any deer, elk, or moose from the states and Canadian provinces where CWD has been detected.

As of 2023, those states and provinces are Alabama, Arkansas, Colorado, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Florida, Kansas, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming, and the Canadian provinces of Alberta, Manitoba, Quebec, and Saskatchewan.

What hunters can bring home:

- meat that is boned, cut, and wrapped; quarters or other portions of meat with no part of the spinal column or head attached
- hides with no heads attached
- clean (no meat or tissue attached) skull plates with antlers attached
- antlers with no meat or tissue attached
- skulls that have been boiled and cleaned to remove flesh and tissue
- upper canine teeth, also known as "buglers," "whistlers," or "ivories"
- finished head, partial body, or whole-body mounts already prepared by a taxidermist
- tested and certified disease-free animals with proof of lab test result

What requirements are in place for meat processors and taxidermists?

Hunters should consult with meat processors or taxidermists for any specific requirements they may have. FWP is asking processors to consider single-animal processing or batch processing only animals testing negative. Furthermore, FWP is requesting that meat processors and taxidermists properly dispose of all large tissue or carcass waste (bone, non-edible portions, etc.) in a Class II landfill (see map/list of landfills on FWP website: fwp.mt.gov/cwd) to prevent the accidental spread of CWD.

Please read the recommendations below if you intend to donate your deer, elk, or moose to a foodbank.

What requirements are in place for donating harvested meat to a food bank?

If you intend to donate your deer, elk, or moose to a food bank, we strongly recommend that it be tested for CWD beforehand. FWP will provide opportunities for sampling and testing at designated CWD-sampling check stations, regional headquarter offices, or through online instructions for mailing samples to the Wildlife Health Lab.

When hunters come to have their animal sampled for CWD, FWP staff will ask hunters whether they intend to donate their animal to a foodbank. This information will allow us to track the test status of donated animals.

Carcasses may be processed prior to having a test result in hand. However, food banks typically do not have a way to track the test status of batches of meat. Thus, FWP strongly urges hunters to have a negative test result in hand prior to donation.

Sampling

How do you test for CWD?

To determine whether an animal is infected, a certified CWD-testing diagnostic laboratory must test an

animal's retropharyngeal lymph nodes or brainstem for evidence of CWD. These samples can only be collected from dead animals. Unfortunately, there are no commercially available non-invasive CWD tests for live animals, and meat cannot be tested for CWD.

How long will it take for me to find out if my deer has CWD?

If your animal is sampled by FWP staff at a check station or regional office during the general surveillance season or during a special hunt, results will be posted online (fwp.mt.gov/cwd) and emailed to the hunter within two weeks.

What happens if my harvested animal tests positive for CWD?

If you received a "suspect" or "positive" test result, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that you do not eat the meat. With a CWD suspect or positive test result, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks authorizes the disposal of the meat, and asks that you ensure all carcass waste (meat, bones, trimmings, hide, etc) is disposed of in a landfill. If you have already sent your animal to a commercial processor or donated it to a foodbank, please contact the Wildlife Health Lab at: 406-577-7883, 406-577-7895, or 406-577-7881 so that we may follow up with the processor and/or recipient of the meat. If you choose not to consume the meat and wish to request a new license for this year or next year, please call your local FWP Regional Office or the Licensing Call Center (406-444-2950) to coordinate the next steps. You will have to properly dispose of all remaining parts in a landfill, and turn in any antlers associated with your harvest, if you request a replacement license.

How can a hunter submit their own sample?

Hunters in Montana can have their deer, elk, or moose tested for CWD with the help of FWP staff. FWP is paying for the testing of samples and CWD sampling is voluntary. In [Priority Surveillance Areas](#), sampling is strongly encouraged to help FWP gather additional data to inform management.

Hunters can take the samples themselves, fill out the online hunter submission form, and mail them to our Wildlife Health Lab in Bozeman, or they can bring the animal (or head) to an FWP regional office or CWD Sampling Station to have FWP staff collect the samples during the general deer and elk rifle season. Hunters who visit a regional office should be prepared to experience wait times during busy hours. Check with your regional office for optimal times, but in general, regional offices will be able to take samples during normal business hours. Sampling locations and hours of operation will also be posted on our website (fwp.mt.gov/cwd). If you are looking for assistance with sampling your animal outside of the general deer and elk rifle season, please call ahead to your local regional office to schedule an appointment.

How many days after harvest can I still have lymph nodes tested for CWD?

While sooner is better than later, lymph nodes last a long time. As long as they are not decomposed or liquified, they can still be tested. Try to keep them cool or frozen until you submit them for testing.

Montana CWD Submission Guide

To submit a sample via mail to the FWP Lab, take the following steps:

1. Collect the lymph nodes (for deer, elk, and moose) and obex (just for moose): Please download the printable [Obex and Lymph Node Extraction Instruction Sheet](#) and/or watch the video on this [webpage](#) for a demonstration of lymph node extraction. Extraction can easily be performed with a field knife. If you need help with sampling, please visit one of the CWD sampling locations or a regional headquarters office for assistance with collecting the obex and lymph nodes. Not all FWP offices can offer help with sampling, so please call ahead to check on availability and to ensure your visit is timely, quick, and smooth.
2. Put the lymph nodes in a sealed plastic bag: Ziploc bags or a similar brand work best. Double bag the sample and wrap it in a paper towel.
3. Fill out the digital [Hunter Harvest Submission Form](#): Please fill out the online Hunter Harvest Submission Form and follow the associated directions for labeling your samples. Your samples must be bagged and labeled to be testable. You will receive several emails confirming your submission, including one that will assign a unique CWD number that will be used to track your test results. Results will be emailed to hunters and will be available online within two weeks. Be sure to record the location of harvest as accurately as possible. Samples without location information will not be tested.
4. Shipment: Place the bagged samples, a frozen ice pack, and the bagged submission form(s) in a small box or shipping envelope and send via your choice of postal carrier. Do not freeze water in a Ziploc bag to use as a cold pack. It will leak and carriers may not deliver a leaking package. We recommend using a carrier that will deliver your samples within 24-48 hours to prevent the samples from rotting. Please try to ship your samples on Monday, Tuesday, or Wednesday of each week, and avoid shipping on holidays, to prevent the samples from sitting over the weekend.
5. Send to:
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
ATTN: Wildlife Health Lab (CWD)
1400 S. 19th Avenue
Bozeman, MT 59718
6. There is no cost for the test.

To submit a sample at an FWP regional office or CWD Sampling Station, bring the following items when you submit your animal's head for testing:

1. Animal's head: Leave 2 to 4 inches of the neck below the lower jawbone and base of the skull to ensure lymph nodes are present and not inadvertently left with the carcass. Samples cannot be collected from frozen heads.
2. Location of harvest: GPS coordinates (lat/long) of where you harvested your animal.