



Chronic Wasting Disease in Montana

Frequently Asked Questions

Announcements for 2026

This year FWP will continue chronic wasting disease (CWD) surveillance and monitoring in specific areas known as Priority Sampling Areas across northwestern and central Montana.

- Test and Dispose Properly:
 - CWD testing is free to hunters in Montana and CWD sample submission is voluntary in most places. There are mandatory testing requirements for licenses associated with CWD management near Libby. Testing is required for all animals harvested using the Deer B License 199-20 in hunting districts (HDs) 100, 103, and 104, or Deer Permit 103-50 in HD 103. All hunters who want their harvested animal sampled can also submit samples themselves by following steps on the [Montana CWD Submission Guide](#) or by visiting a [CWD Sampling Station](#).
 - Carcass disposal requirements: Carcass parts, such as brain, eyes, spleen, lymph nodes, 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 CWD. This requirement applies to all deer, elk, and moose carcasses wherever in the state they are harvested by hunters or possessed through vehicle-killed salvage. Protect our herds: properly dispose of carcasses.
- If you intend to use scents to mask human odor or as an attractant for deer and elk, you should be aware of the regulations regarding which scents can legally be used. Artificial scents are safest, but you can also use scents certified by the Responsible Hunting Scent Association. You can identify certified scents by the DPP✓ or RtQUIC✓ labels on them.
- Certain areas of the state are designated as [Priority Sampling 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. (Note: there are mandatory sampling requirements for some areas associated with hunting districts 100, 103, and 104. See the 2026 FWP hunting regulations.) For instructions on how or where to submit a sample, visit fwp.mt.gov/cwd.

- Report sick-looking deer, elk, or moose. Please avoid shooting an animal that looks diseased or sick. Instead, you should take a GPS point, record the animal's symptoms, and report it to FWP. If you shoot an animal that looks diseased or sick, report it immediately to your local FWP office and limit handling it while awaiting further instructions. FWP staff will need to evaluate diseased or sick harvested animals to determine if an animal is fit for consumption or eligible for a replacement license.

General Overview

What is chronic wasting disease (CWD)?

CWD is a 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, misfolded proteins, called prions, that spread throughout the animal and result in neurological damage and eventual death. These prions are found throughout bodily tissues and secretions and are shed into the environment before and after death. When susceptible animals come into contact with the prions, either from other infected animals or from contaminated environments, they can become 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 become very skinny and sick-looking in the last stages on the infection just before they die. There is no vaccine or cure for CWD. Symptoms of CWD typically take 16 to 24 months to develop, but animals may test positive as early as 3 to 6 months into the infection. 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 do 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 soaked 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 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 2025, it has been

found in captive or free-ranging herds in 37 states, five 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, Idaho, and British Columbia. CWD could spread to new areas in Montana through movement of live infected animals, or through human activities, such as moving and improperly disposing of infected carcasses.

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?

CWD prions spread between animals through bodily fluids like feces, saliva, blood, or urine, either through direct contact between animals or indirectly through contact with contaminated surfaces in the environment, such as soil, food, or water. Once introduced into an area, the infectious CWD prions can be transmitted among deer, elk, and moose and can spread quickly. CWD prions can remain infectious in the environment for years, so animals can contract CWD from the environment long after the infected animal that contaminated the surfaces has died. Feeding wildlife such as deer is illegal and can cause animals to congregate, leading to rapid disease spread.

Management

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

If CWD infects enough animals, it could reduce herd numbers in the long term. Other states have seen deer population declines correlated with CWD prevalences above 20 to 40 percent. In Wyoming, some heavily infected herds of mule deer declined 21 percent per year, and white-tailed deer declined 10 percent per year. Colorado saw a 45 percent decline in mule deer in CWD-positive areas 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 preventing spread and managing CWD-infected areas with the goal of keeping prevalences at or lower than 5 percent. This may include 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 across large swaths of the state known as Priority Sampling Areas. See our map [here](#) for the latest Priority Sampling Areas and to learn more.

Hunters who harvest a deer, elk, or moose in these areas are asked to voluntarily submit their animal for

sampling, so FWP can gather additional data. FWP uses the information from these samples to track where CWD is found in Montana, monitor changes in CWD prevalence, and inform the best management strategies for the affected hunting districts. Early detection of CWD in new areas is important to management efforts and requires many samples.

FWP also has liberalized harvest in certain CWD-positive hunting districts, with the goal of reducing herd densities and mule deer buck densities to reduce CWD transmission. Male deer are more likely to be CWD positive than does, and long-term studies suggest harvesting a high proportion of bucks annually can effectively keep CWD prevalences lower than would otherwise be expected (Moss et al, 2024). FWP conducts special hunts and has designated CWD Management Zones for CWD management. In southwest Montana, FWP has conducted a special CWD hunt known as the Southwestern Montana CWD Management Hunt. In northwestern Montana, FWP continues CWD management in the Libby CWD Management Zone with the Libby CWD Hunt. In collaboration with the Libby City Council and as part of the urban deer management plan for the town of Libby, FWP will continue efforts to trap and euthanize white-tailed deer within the town of Libby with the goal of reducing deer densities and helping control CWD within the surrounding Libby CWD Management Zone. For more information on the most current CWD management in Montana, please see the CWD Annual Report under “Additional Information” at fwp.mt.gov/cwd.

FWP continues to enforce laws banning baiting, feeding, and illegal carcass dumping to help prevent human-caused CWD spread. FWP continues to collaborate with other neighboring U.S. states, Canadian provinces, the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, and research scientists to engage and contribute to current studies and research that advance our understanding of best CWD management practices.

What can I do to help with CWD?

Hunters should consider getting their harvested animal tested. Hunting is the primary tool for monitoring and managing the spread of CWD. FWP uses sample data from harvested animals to determine the estimated CWD prevalence in positive hunting districts and to understand if CWD has spread to new districts. Even if you’re in a hunting district with no CWD detections, CWD may still be present but undetected because of low sampling numbers. FWP also uses this information to determine how to respond to CWD when present and to eventually assess whether our management strategies are working.

Properly dispose of carcasses. Proper carcass disposal is critical to protecting our herds. All carcass parts leftover from processing, 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 possessed through vehicle-killed salvage.

Receive a “not detected” CWD result before dropping your animal off at a meat processor or food bank. This will help prevent contamination of equipment and human consumption of CWD positive meat.

Report sick-looking deer, elk, or moose. Please avoid shooting animals that look diseased or sick. Instead, you should take a GPS point, record the animal’s symptoms, and report it to FWP. 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 evaluate diseased or sick harvested animals to determine whether an animal may be disposed of or eligible for a replacement license.

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.

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

Please check the state carcass transportation requirements for any state you may enter with a deer, elk, or moose that was harvested in 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 2026, those states and provinces are Alabama, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, 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, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming, and the Canadian provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Quebec, and Saskatchewan.

What hunters can bring into Montana:

- 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 all 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

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 ("not detected"). Furthermore, FWP is requesting that meat processors and taxidermists properly dispose of all tissue or carcass waste (bone, non-edible portions, etc.) in a Class II landfill (see map/[list of landfills on FWP website](#)) 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 that you get it tested for CWD and receive a "not detected" test result beforehand. FWP will provide opportunities for samples to be collected for testing at designated CWD sampling stations, regional headquarter offices, and through online instructions for mailing samples to the Wildlife Health Program.

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 "not detected" test result in hand prior to donation.

How does the impact of CWD compare to Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease (EHD) and Blue Tongue Virus (BTV)?

Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease (EHD) and Blue Tongue Virus (BTV) are caused by viruses transmitted by biting midges. Both diseases progress rapidly and have high mortality rates but are not always fatal. EHD and BTV occur seasonally (generally in late summer or fall) and can cause large, localized mortality events in mule deer, white-tailed deer, and pronghorn. Elk and bighorn sheep, along with other species, are also susceptible. Outbreaks of EHD or BTV alone are not usually associated with long-term population declines. Biologists become more concerned about the impact of these diseases when paired with poor environmental conditions, low recruitment rates, and other diseases.

CWD is caused by an infectious misfolded protein called a prion and can be transmitted through direct animal-to-animal contact or contact with contaminated surfaces. The disease progresses slowly and is 100% fatal. It is only known to affect deer family species, such as mule deer, white-tailed deer, elk, and moose. In states such as Colorado, Wyoming, Arkansas, and Wisconsin, they have documented population declines in deer associated with CWD prevalences exceeding 20-30%.

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 currently no validated tests conducted by NAHLN laboratories for CWD testing of meat, and there are no commercially available tests that meet these testing standards.

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 sampling 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. Moose samples may take three to four 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, FWP 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 Program 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. Replacement licenses will only be issued based on results from official, validated tests by NAHLN laboratories, which includes tests submitted through FWP and most other state and provincial wildlife agencies.

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 most places. In [Priority Sampling Areas](#), sampling is strongly encouraged to help FWP gather additional data to inform management.

Hunters can collect the samples themselves, fill out the online hunter submission form, and mail them to

our Wildlife Health Program 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 collect samples during normal business hours during general season. 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 Wildlife Health Program, 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 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 GPS 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 it 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 Program (CWD)

1400 S. 19th Avenue

Bozeman, MT 59718

6. There is no cost for the test.

To have a sample collected by FWP staff at an FWP regional office or CWD Sampling Station, bring the following items:

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; please bring them thawed.
2. Location of harvest: GPS coordinates (lat/long) of where you harvested your animal.