

# Chronic Wasting Disease in Deer and Elk (CWD)

## What is Chronic Wasting Disease?

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) is a progressive, fatal disease of elk, deer, and other related species. Ongoing research shows CWD does not affect cattle. CWD is a member of the transmissible spongiform encephalopathy family of diseases, which means the infective agent is believed to be a prion, a misfolded protein in the brain. There is no evidence, to date that CWD affects humans.

## Chronic Wasting Disease in Canada

The first cases of CWD were found in the late 1960's in captive deer in a wildlife research facility in Colorado, USA. The first case in Canada was diagnosed in 1974, in a deer in an Ontario zoo. In 2000, CWD was confirmed on an elk farm in Saskatchewan. The farm likely was infected by elk imported from the USA.

Shortly after its detection on game farms, mandatory provincial CWD surveillance programs were developed in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and the Yukon. The programs require all farmed deer or elk, older than 12 months, that die; are slaughtered; or which are down, disabled or diseased; be tested for the disease.

In 2001 two mule deer in Saskatchewan were the first wildlife in Canada to be diagnosed with CWD. A surveillance program tests wild deer and elk killed during the hunting season. It is not possible to determine whether CWD originally arose in wild or captive deer or elk. As of January 2006, 34 wild animals in Saskatchewan tested positive for CWD.

On September 2, 2005, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency confirmed the first case of CWD in wild deer in near Oyen, Alberta. A total of 169 deer in the vicinity were tested and two additional cases of CWD were confirmed on October 3, 2005. On December 9, 2005, CWD was confirmed in a mule deer near Empress, Alberta. Between 2002-2005 35,533 wild and farmed animals have been tested through Alberta's monitoring program for CWD. As of June 2005, Manitoba has tested approximately 4,021 wild deer, elk, and moose.

## How Does CWD Spread Between Animals?

Contaminated pastures on which infected animals have lived can transmit CWD to other animals. The disease may also be transmitted from animal to animal. This may be through saliva, manure, urine, or afterbirth. Research into the means of transmission is continuing.

## How Is CWD Handled In Canada?

CWD is a reportable disease in Canada, which means all cases must be reported to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, the federal government agency responsible for the health of Canada's farm animals. When CWD is suspected or diagnosed, the farm and animals are placed under quarantine. Infected animals are humanely destroyed and incinerated, and the infected premise is thoroughly cleaned (decontaminated).

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## How Certain Is It That CWD Does Not Affect Cattle?

Research into whether or not CWD can spread to cattle has been ongoing in the USA for many years. Cattle have been pastured together with CWD-infected deer and elk for over five years, with none of the cattle becoming infected. Cattle have also been directly inoculated with CWD-infective material and have shown no signs of developing the disease.

## Is It Safe For Consumers To Eat Elk Or Deer Meat In Canada?

It is safe to eat elk or deer meat in Canada. Elk or deer meat sold to the public is from farm-raised animals. Meat from farm-raised elk and deer is inspected prior to sale. Animals showing signs of disease are not sold for food. There is also no evidence that CWD affects humans.