

Chronic Wasting Disease: Recommended Practices for Deer Hunters

The following information is intended for deer hunters living or hunting in chronic wasting disease (CWD) outbreak areas. This information does not cover all that is known about managing CWD, rather it provides simple precautions and answers many frequently asked questions that NDA has received from hunters in areas affected by this deadly disease. The information is based around the four cornerstones of Quality Deer Management (QDM) and how deer hunters can assist in each area. It was compiled from multiple sources, including the CWD Alliance (CWD-info.org), USGS National Wildlife Health Center (nwhc.usgs.gov), Michigan DNR (Michigan.gov), and NDA (DeerAssociation.com).

HERD MANAGEMENT

One of the most important things we can do once CWD is detected in a wild deer population is reduce the spread of the disease and attempt to contain it. CWD is spread from deer to deer through direct contact; through contact with the urine, feces, saliva, semen or blood of infected deer; and through indirect transmission by contact with contaminated materials like soil, bait piles and mineral licks. Thus, reducing the spread of disease means reducing contact among individual deer. Reducing deer numbers is never palatable to hunters, but this step is important for the future of the deer herd.

Is harvesting antlerless deer really that important to managing CWD?

Yes. Even though bucks contract CWD at higher rates than does, it is a mistake to focus the majority of disease management efforts on the bucks in a disease zone. Research in Minnesota showed yearling does dispersed at similar rates as yearling bucks, and research in Wisconsin showed does were 10 times more likely to be CWD positive when there was one CWD positive relative nearby. Even though CWD prevalence rates are higher in bucks, there are always more than twice as many 2½-year-old and

older does as bucks on the landscape. Finally, less than half of the hunters who go afield will shoot a deer in any given year, and only about 15 percent shoot more than one deer. So, we need to shoot bucks, but in disease zones hunters should be shooting more adult does than bucks.

Which bucks should we shoot in CWD zones?

When CWD is first discovered in a new area, initial goals include identifying prevalence and distribution of the disease and preventing it from spreading. In this early stage of an outbreak, protecting any adult deer can be counterproductive to long-term success. Once CWD is established in the deer herd, older bucks are two to four times more likely to have the disease than younger bucks. Therefore, on paper, the best way to combat CWD where it is established is to keep density low and the age structure young. That means not allowing bucks or does to mature.

However, in reality, hunters are needed to regulate deer populations, and many hunters stay engaged for the opportunity to pursue mature bucks. It is NDA's opinion that as long as hunters continue hunting, shooting antlerless deer, and helping keep deer herds in check, then it is more beneficial to have a balanced age structure with some mature bucks in the population. Therefore, NDA's recommendation in areas where CWD is established in the population is for hunters to harvest antlerless deer to help reduce deer density and disease transmission, continue managing for a balanced buck age structure if you desire, and apply increased harvest pressure to all bucks, including a focus on those 2½ years of age or older.

Should I eat the venison from deer harvested in a CWD management zone?

There is currently no evidence CWD has been transmitted to humans. Nevertheless, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention encourages hunters in outbreak zones to have each deer tested, and then only consume the venison if CWD was not detected.

HABITAT MANAGEMENT

There has been very little research on how habitat management impacts CWD prevalence or spread.

Should we discourage the use of food plots?

No, the science is not strong enough to discourage food-plot use in CWD management zones. On the plus side, food plots can assist in herd management and harvesting antlerless deer. From a disease standpoint, you do not want to artificially congregate deer at small sites, as with bait, supplemental feed or minerals.

HUNTER MANAGEMENT

CWD is most easily transported via live deer and parts of infected deer. As hunters, we should oppose movement of live deer, and we should avoid moving high-risk parts of dead animals from a known disease area. These parts include the brain, spine, eyes, spleen, tonsils and lymph nodes. One of the most important things a hunter who takes a deer home can do is make certain unused carcass parts end up at a landfill and not in the environment where other deer can encounter them.

Why should hunters stay engaged?

It is crucial for hunters to stay engaged to help manage deer herds. Hunters are the most important deer management tool, and no wildlife agency can manage deer without their help.

Should hunters use minerals in disease zones?

No. Deer are attracted to mineral supplements throughout most of their range, and congregating deer and having multiple individuals consume minerals from a site can enhance disease transmission. The NDA does not support mineral use in disease management areas.

HERD MONITORING

When CWD hits an area, monitoring herd health and age structure is more important than ever.

How can I monitor the herd in my area?

You can conduct population and/or observational surveys to estimate deer density. You can collect harvest data to monitor changes in age structure and herd productivity

and health. These efforts can be greatly enhanced through participation in a QDM Cooperative.

What can hunters do to assist with monitoring CWD?

You can support the wildlife agency's efforts. Become informed on the regulations regarding deer harvest and reporting. Submit all deer you harvest for data collection and testing at the designated location for your area. Stay engaged on the issue, inform your neighbors about the importance of reporting sick deer and following deer check-in regulations (in both CWD-positive and negative areas), do your part to harvest antlerless deer, take advantage of CWD testing, and be a supporting partner of your wildlife agency.

What is the long-term outlook for CWD in my area?

In the early stages of an outbreak, it is possible to break the cycle of transmission by rapidly lowering deer density and hopefully killing any additional infected deer in the area. However, once the disease is established and additional cases continue to appear, the goal might be shifted to continue holding density low and maintaining a younger age structure to help slow the spread of the disease. CWD moves slowly through a population, and it kills individual deer slowly. The impact is not dramatic or rapid, which is why some hunters believe CWD is not a serious problem. However, over the course of years, CWD will gradually grow in prevalence if it is not actively managed, and it will eventually reduce populations.

For now, it's best for all hunters to focus on preventing CWD from spreading into new areas. If it arrives, it's best to focus on preventing its growth and expansion. Researchers are currently working to learn more about the disease, the best methods of control, and the potential for a CWD vaccine. Hopefully, the years to come will bring us new understanding and new tools to combat this serious challenge to whitetails and our deer hunting heritage.

About NDA

The National Deer Association is a non-profit conservation group that works to ensure the future of wild deer, wildlife habitat and hunting. Formed by combining the strengths of two long-serving organizations, the National Deer Association has a combined 38 years of mission work. Visit DeerAssociation.com or follow @deerassociation on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube.