

## Findings Abstracts

# Hunter Perceptions and Behaviors Related to Chronic Wasting Disease in Northern Illinois

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Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) is a Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathy (TSE) found in wild and captive cervids (white-tailed deer, elk, and mule deer). CWD causes a mutation in protein composition, resulting in cavitations in the brain tissue. The disease is diagnosed by the presence of prions in oral (sublingual) glands. Little is known about the origin, transmission, or incubation of the disease, nor the manner in which prions affect proteins. Deer infected with the disease do not necessarily exhibit outward symptoms early in the infection. In the late stages, however, the animal loses motor functions and becomes disoriented. The disease takes approximately 15 months to reach the late stage and is always fatal. It is not known to cross the species barrier to infect humans.

CWD first appeared in wild white-tailed deer in south-central Wisconsin during February 2002 and northern Illinois during November 2002, two weeks prior to the opening of the first of two firearm deer seasons in Illinois. The Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) was interested in possible changes in hunter behavior in northern Illinois counties given the presence of CWD in Wisconsin and northern Illinois. During the two-week period of this study, the number of cases of CWD in Illinois rose from one to seven.

A telephone survey was conducted using a random sample of 500 firearm deer permit holders selected from seven counties in northern Illinois: Boone, De Kalb, Jo Davies, McHenry, Ogle, Stevenson, and Winnebago. Hunters were called during the weeks of December 2 and December 9, 2002. Of the 336 hunters contacted, 249 (74%) agreed to participate in the survey. Each individual completed 17 questions regarding their sources of information about CWD, perceived

This project was funded by Wildlife Restoration Fund Grant W-112-R-12.  
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threat of the disease, and changes in hunting behavior as a result of the presence of CWD in Illinois.

The majority of respondents (88%) hunted deer in one of the seven counties during the 2002 Illinois firearm deer season. Participation varied by county, from a high of 95% in Boone and Jo Davies Counties to a low of 80% in De Kalb County. Almost all hunters (99%) were aware of CWD. More hunters (98%) had heard about CWD in Wisconsin than Illinois (89%), and over two-thirds (69%) were aware of CWD in states other than Illinois and Wisconsin. CWD in Illinois did not influence the hunters' (83%) participation in the Illinois firearm deer season. Of the 17% who said CWD influenced their hunting participation, 61% reported they watched deer for signs of abnormal behavior before shooting, 27% did not eat meat from harvested animals, 8% decided not to hunt, and 4% were eating venison but their family abstained.

Although a majority of hunters (54%) reported harvesting a deer during the Illinois firearm deer season, less than half (42%) had their deer tested for CWD at the check station. Over two-thirds (68%) felt the IDNR efforts to address CWD were adequate, 18% felt efforts were less than what they preferred, and 14% perceived IDNR efforts were more than what were required.

When asked how they received information about CWD, newspapers were used most often (80%), followed by word-of-mouth from friends and relatives (54%), television news coverage (49%), and outdoor magazines (45%). Many hunters (45%) reported television coverage was somewhat informative, and some (15%) felt the coverage was very or extremely informative. By comparison, more hunters (23%) reported coverage of CWD in newspapers was very or extremely useful. Few hunters, however, based their decision to hunt on the televised news (12%) or newspaper (15%) coverage of CWD in Illinois. Similarly, although three-fourths (77%) had read newspaper articles or saw televised news accounts of CWD in Wisconsin, only a few hunters (6%) said their choice of whether or not to hunt was based on this news coverage.