



Hemorrhagic Disease in Deer – Frequently Asked Questions

What is Hemorrhagic Disease, or “Bluetongue”?

Hemorrhagic Disease results from naturally occurring viruses that affect deer. It is transmitted through the bite of a midge (gnat) that carries the virus, and not directly from deer to deer.

Are people at risk?

No. This virus does not affect people, so it cannot be contracted by eating meat from infected deer. The Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources always recommends harvesting and consuming only healthy deer. Use disposable gloves to field dress game and to process raw meat, which helps prevent food-borne illnesses in general.

What about my pets and livestock?

Pets are not susceptible. Livestock can be exposed, but do not usually die.

Where has it been found this year?

Kentucky had confirmed cases in three counties (Bell, Harlan, Laurel) as of Sept. 28, 2020. The department is investigating reports of potential cases in 16 other counties. Hemorrhagic Disease occurs in cyclical outbreaks, with the last large scale regional outbreak reported in eastern Kentucky in 2017. The disease occurs across the country and has been documented for more than 60 years.

Will this affect the deer hunting season?

No. Seasons and deer harvest limits will not change. Biologists estimate Kentucky’s deer herd at 1 million animals prior to the start of the seasons. Most deer will not be affected. After the first hard frost, the insects which carry the disease will die off and the outbreak will stop. Herd numbers typically rebound quickly after an outbreak. Hunters can enjoy the deer season as usual. Animals that recover are safe to eat since the virus cannot be transmitted to humans.

Will this affect elk?

While elk in eastern Kentucky can contract the disease, they usually show no outward signs of illness. Hemorrhagic Disease is typically not fatal for elk.

Is this the same as Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD)?

No. Chronic wasting disease has not been detected in Kentucky. While Hemorrhagic Disease does cause mortality among white-tailed deer herds, there are also animals that survive and produce protective antibodies, which can be passed to offspring. This is an important distinction when discussing this

disease compared to Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD), which is always fatal. Chronic Wasting Disease poses a real and significant threat to the commonwealth's cervid population and should not be confused with Hemorrhagic Disease.

What should I do if I find sick or dead deer?

Report it to Fish and Wildlife using the online form on the department's website at fw.ky.gov.

How many deer will be affected this year?

Hemorrhagic Disease affects deer in Kentucky every year. More severe outbreaks may occur statewide every 5 to 7 years. Outbreaks can be major, but the population rebounds quickly. Only a fraction of the deer population is affected even in years with major outbreaks. Some deer will contract the virus and survive.

What can be done?

Hemorrhagic Disease cannot be prevented or treated. Kentucky Fish and Wildlife tracks reports from the public and tests sick deer for the virus when possible.

When will it end?

The first hard frost will kill the gnats which carry the disease. This will stop the outbreak.

What should I do with a deer carcass that I find?

Please report unexplained deer deaths or sickness using the online form on Kentucky Fish and Wildlife's website, fw.ky.gov. If near a home or business, you can bury it or cover it with lime to reduce the smell. Remove it from any body of water that is a drinking water source.

Will Kentucky Fish and Wildlife remove the carcass?

No. Landowners may leave carcasses to decompose naturally or dispose of them if they wish to. If you see a carcass on a road or roadside, please contact the county road department.