

Anthrax in Deer

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Anthrax was confirmed in white-tailed deer in northwestern Mississippi this summer. The diagnosis was made in early July in animals from Leflore, Sunflower, and Tallahatchie counties. Although the outbreak is still under investigation, the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks did not detect any evidence of new cases in August and September, which is good evidence that the outbreak has subsided.

Anthrax is a bacterial disease that can cause rapid death losses in deer and in unvaccinated domestic livestock. Most of the lower Mississippi drainage system is endemic for anthrax. Spores of the bacterium can survive for years in the soil, and sudden changes in soil moisture caused by flooding or drought can trigger the development of infectious bacteria from these dormant spores. Animals become afflicted when they ingest the anthrax bacteria and are rapidly overwhelmed when the bacteria invade all body systems. Classical signs of anthrax include failure of the blood to clot, bleeding from body orifices, an enlarged spleen, and sudden death.

Since anthrax is highly infectious, carcasses from suspect animals should be handled with caution to avoid spreading the organism. Humans can be infected and usually develop a skin ulcer at the point of contact. Antibiotic treatment of humans generally is successful, but occasionally cases can be fatal. Once an outbreak has subsided, surviving animals are no threat to humans because long-term infections do not occur. Deer hunting season will open as scheduled this fall in Mississippi, and wildlife officials are not anticipating any problem with hunter-harvested animals.