

Safe Handling of Venison is Easy with Advance Planning

This article looks at game from a food safety perspective and provides tips for safe handling of wild-harvested venison.



Deer hunting season is upon us and for many hunting enthusiasts in the Commonwealth, it is the best season of the year. And the venison they bring home is gaining ground in many households as a protein source. The nutritional value of venison outperforms red meat in leanness and overall calories. Venison is high in essential amino acids and is a rich source of thiamine, riboflavin, niacin, iron, and zinc. Venison meat is a particularly good choice of protein for those who suffer from cardiovascular disease and are searching for low cholesterol and saturated fat protein choices.

Much of the venison consumed in Pennsylvania is harvested annually through hunting. But in order to ensure this nutritious meat is of wholesome quality, hunters should prepare in advance to keep the meat they harvest safe.

So, how is wild game at risk for contamination? It starts at the time of harvest from the field. Field dressing any wild game requires important pre-planning strategies. For example, harvesting deer in the fall requires attention to temperature control of the warm carcass when outside temperature rise above 41 degrees. Improper handling or lack of temperature control will allow natural pathogens the opportunity to grow, resulting in highly contaminated meat that may impose serious health risks.

In addition to monitoring and maintaining temperature control, we also need to focus on cross contamination.

Understandably, the environment that we make the harvest

from can often be a source of additional contamination. Here are some tips to minimize the risks while field dressing wild game:

Plan to take paper towels or plastic to place down as a barrier between the ground and tools, minimizing the risk for cross-contamination. A plastic drop cloth serves as a great barrier.

Carrying a pair of disposable plastic gloves is a good habit to get into. Always consider protecting yourself from the possible risks of contracting a foodborne pathogen, especially if you have any open wounds on the hand. Carry some prepackaged alcohol wipes to wash your hands before, during and after removing the entrails.

When the outside temperature is above 41 degrees, consider taking coolers packed with either bags or blocks of ice. If you're working with small game remove the hide as quickly as possible to allow the carcass to cool quickly when surrounded by ice. Large game should have the hide removed quickly after harvest if the outside temperature is above 41 degrees. The worst practice is wrapping large game in plastic or a tarp to keep it clean when transporting it. Wrapping the carcass only traps the heat, leading the internal temperature of the meat to remain in the temperature danger zone. If at all possible, try packing the internal cavity with bags of ice to cool the carcass down. The longer you let the carcass remain at temperatures above 41 degrees from the time of harvest till the time of processing, the greater the risk for foodborne pathogens to grow and become dangerous.

The carcass should be cut within seven days after harvest if it was chilled rapidly and sooner if warmer temperatures prevail.

For best flavor, limit fresh venison to eight months of frozen storage and seasoned and cured venison to four months of frozen storage.

The next time you go hunting, be prepared and plan for the safety of the meat you harvest. As you know, it takes a lot of work, time and patience to be successful in your hunt and the last thing you would want is to mishandle the meat leading to a foodborne illness.



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