

Guidelines for the Processing and Preparation of Venison

Deer season is upon us and many hunters are concerned about rabies. Rabies has affected a variety of wildlife in New York State, including a small number of deer. The chance that a deer is infected with the rabies virus is very low. No person in New York State or in any of the other mid-Atlantic states affected by raccoon rabies has ever been known to contract rabies as a result of hunting, field dressing, butchering a deer, or from consuming the venison.

Safety Guidelines

Rabies virus mainly is present in brain, spinal cord and salivary glands of an infected animal. However, it also may be found in nerves associated with the meat. The virus can survive indefinitely in carcasses properly preserved by refrigeration and freezing. Deer and other wild game may also contain bacteria that could cause illness if the meat is prepared or cooked improperly.

Do not hunt any animal you find acting abnormally. Rabies affects the part of the brain that controls behavior. Many of the deer who have tested positive for rabies in New York State were reported to have been acting abnormally, or if found dead, showed physical signs of abnormal behavior. *Do not tag an animal you find dead, even if it appears that another hunter killed it. Do not take road-killed deer.* A rabid deer may be more likely to be struck.

The following guidelines may be used to further reduce your risk of illness:

Handling and Storage of Wild Game

- Accept only wholesome, uncontaminated wild game.
- Use rubber or plastic gloves when handling uncooked meat.
- Keep raw meats tightly wrapped and separated from other foods. This is a good practice for all meats.
- Keep meat refrigerated below 45°F or frozen. Thaw in the refrigerator or in the microwave for immediate use. Freezing does not kill the rabies virus. Precautions should be used during thawing.

Cooking

- Cook ground venison until well done. Solid cuts should be cooked to an internal temperature of **140° F** for at least 12 minutes. Always use a meat thermometer to assure complete cooking.



- Marinating in the preparation of jerky will not inactivate the rabies virus. Gloves should be worn throughout the marinating process. The slow cooking of jerky will kill any rabies virus in the final product.
- The long-term, high temperature nature of preparing stews is generally an excellent way to assure the safety of deer meat. Meat that is tender or falling apart in a stew mixture is a good indicator of adequate cooking.
- The cold process of smoking deer meat is not recommended. Only the hot process of smoking should be used.

Leftovers

- Keep foods hot at **140° F**. Refrigerate leftovers immediately. Reheat to **165° F**.

Clean-up

- Soak any utensils used to prepare the meat in a solution of one part household bleach to 10 parts water for 20 minutes. Use a disinfectant to wipe down work area (counters and cutting boards). Wash hands thoroughly before and after food preparation.

Information for Butchers

If you are butchering deer meat, you need to take additional precautions.

- Use of electric saws is not recommended due to the increased risk of splattering of tissue.
- Sawing through the spinal column is not recommended. Deboning the meat is the preferred alternative.
- Extreme caution should be used if the cranium is removed with the horns, since rabies virus is present in the brain tissue of a rabid animal. Wear protective clothing (gloves, face mask, goggles). Work carefully to avoid splattering brain tissue. Immediately soak the skull portion of the antlers and any utensils used in a solution of 1 part household bleach to 10 parts water for 20 minutes.
- Be aware that grinding deer meat for sausage or other preparations can increase the likelihood of contamination. Do not include glands or organs, which are rich in nerve tissue in such preparations.

If you have questions, please contact your local health department

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