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Avoiding Chronic Wasting Disease

by Sherry Maston, Wyoming Department of Agriculture Consumer Health

Hunting season is an opportunity to stock up the freezer with tasty wild game meat. There are some important steps to ensure the game meat remains safe.

First, hunters need to choose a healthy-looking animal to bag. There is a potential for Chronic Wasting Disease in deer and elk. A testing program is available for Chronic Wasting Disease and should be utilized for safety precautions. Contact your local Game & Fish department for testing sites. Once you've a healthy animal, here are some safety precautions to ensure that it remains safe.

Hunters need to wear disposable gloves while eviscerating (gutting) the animal. Also, in order to prevent the spread of the prion that causes chronic wasting disease, knives or saws used to sever the spinal cord need to be cleaned and sanitized with a 50/50 bleach-water solution. For example, after removing the head, place the knife or saw in a container of bleach water. Mixed properly, the bleach solution will sanitize the equipment.

Wash hands and wear gloves to remove the hide, using a clean, sanitized knife. Trim any visible contaminants, such as hair or debris, from the carcass. Wash the carcass thoroughly after trimming.

Wild game carcasses need to be cooled quickly to prevent the growth of microorganisms. Cooling can be quite challenging for larger animals such as elk and moose. Proper air circulation around the carcass will aid in cooling.

For hunters processing their own deer or elk, it is better to make all boneless cuts because of Chronic Wasting Disease. Bone-in cuts are acceptable with other game species. Remove any lymph nodes within the game meat, while processing. Deer and elk have lymph nodes in the neck and hind or round steak area.

Package and freeze game meat immediately after processing.

Thawing all meat on the bottom shelf of refrigerator. Room temperature thawing promotes the growth of microorganisms, which could cause food borne illness.

Wash hands for twenty seconds before and after handling raw meat. Practicing good personal hygiene is always important for food safety. Avoid raw meats or soiled surfaces from raw meats coming into contact with other foods. Equipment and surfaces can be cleaned and sanitized by washing with soapy water, rinsing, and then sanitizing with a chlorine bleach solution, mixed at one tablespoon per gallon of water. Note: this bleach solution is at a different concentration than what is required to sanitize equipment that has come into contact with Chronic Wasting Disease.

Wild game meats must be cooked to an internal temperature of 165°F to eliminate microorganisms that cause illness. Proper cooking is important for any food. If there are leftovers, be sure to refrigerate them immediately to start the cooling process. Leftovers need to be cooled quickly when passing through the temperature danger zone, 40 to

140 degrees F.

If hunting families practice these food safety tips, meals are sure to be enjoyed without the unpleasantness of food borne illness.

The Wyoming Food Safety Coalition is dedicated to reducing the risk of food borne illness. For questions contact WFSC President, Sherry Maston, at (307) 322-9671, your county Extension office, or your local sanitarian.