



Game Meat Safety

As you are getting ready to go hunting, there are three things about caring for and preserving game meat that should be stressed.

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With deer season just around the corner the yearly job of preserving game meat begins. For many, venison and other game meats are a major part of the diet. Therefore proper handling of game meat from field to table is extremely important.

Although warmer temperatures may be

more comfortable for hunters, colder temperatures help keep game meat safe. Game animals, especially deer, are known to carry *E. coli* and game birds can carry *Salmonella*. Since cleaning, dressing, and butchering are often done in the field, airborne contaminants, weather, temperature, and other factors can affect game meat safety as well.

Bacteria grow most rapidly in the range of temperatures between 40°F and 140°F. They can double in number in as little as 20 minutes. A deer shot at 7 a.m. and left in the back of a truck until 5 p.m. has had plenty of time for bacteria to multiply. Spoilage bacteria will make themselves known in a variety of ways. Meat may develop an uncharacteristic odor or color, or it may become slimy or sticky. Temperatures below 40 degrees will slow the growth of bacteria, but will not kill them. Pathogenic bacteria such as *E. coli* and *Salmonella* however do not change the appearance, smell or texture of the meat.

As you are getting ready to go hunting, there are three important things about caring for and preserving game meat:

1. wash your hands often;
2. be sure to heat jerky to 160°F before beginning the dehydrating process; and
3. can game meat in a pressure canner.

Whether you are gutting a deer or cutting up a pheasant, there are bacteria present on the meat, cutting surfaces, and your hands. Good handwashing procedures include using hot water, soap, and scrubbing for 20 seconds before rinsing your hands and drying them on paper towels. This is easy to do in your basement or backyard; but in the field, you can use plastic gloves to minimize the transfer of bacteria. If you're using gloves, remember that you have to change them often - just as often as you would wash your hands.

Foodborne illnesses caused by *Salmonella* and *E. coli* have raised questions about the safety of traditional drying methods for making both beef and venison jerky. The USDA's current recommendation for making jerky safely is to heat the meat to 160°F before the dehydrating process. This step assures that any bacteria present will be destroyed by wet heat. Most commercial dehydrating instructions do not include this step, and dehydrator temperatures, particularly in older models, may not reach 160°F. The Penn State Extension publication "[Proper Processing of Wild Game and Fish](#)" gives details for a variety of methods to make tasty, safe jerky.

If you have never tasted home canned venison, you don't know what a taste treat you are missing. The best part is that home canned venison is also a great convenience food. The meat is tender, ready to heat and eat, and versatile in recipes from venison stroganoff to stews. The main thing to remember about home canned venison is that it must be canned using a pressure canner. Meat is a low-acid food and can only be preserved safely by using a pressure canner. Here are just a few hints before you start to can for the season:

1. If you have a dial gauge pressure canner, it needs to be tested annually for accuracy. This service is done free of charge at the Extension Office. Call your county extension office for an appointment before there is a deer hanging in your backyard.
2. Use only quality canning equipment, such as standard glass jars and two-piece flat lids with screw bands. I prefer wide mouth jars for canning meat - much easier to use.

3. Use only a pressure canner for processing the meat. A boiling water bath canner will not guarantee a safe product.
4. Be sure to vent the canner for 10 minutes before beginning to build pressure in the canner.
5. Make the proper adjustment in your processing time for your altitude.
6. Allow the canner to cool naturally. The cool-down time is actually part of the processing time.

If you would like more information on processing game meat, making sausage or jerky, or recipes using your game meat, call the Extension Office and request "[Proper Processing of Wild Game and Fish](#) ." This 18-page booklet describes the preparation of venison, birds, fish, and other game after it is brought in from the field. Sections include the importance of temperature in controlling spoilage, butchering and cutting, differences between aging, curing and smoking, canning game, and recipes for jerky and sausages. Information on proper field dressing is also available.