

Extension Responds: Chronic Wasting Disease

Donated Venison and CWD: A Fact Sheet for Food Pantries and Consumers

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Since the discovery of Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) in Wisconsin deer in 2002, many people have expressed concern over the safety of venison. As food pantry staff, you may wonder about the status of deer donation programs. This fact sheet, revised and updated in 2004, gives you background information on CWD, and answers questions related to handling venison this fall.

What is CWD? Chronic wasting disease, or CWD, is a fatal disease that attacks deer and elk. Scientists believe that CWD is caused by a protein called a prion. Prions concentrate where there is a lot of nerve tissue, such as the brain, spinal cord, eyes, and in the lymph nodes and spleen.

Why has CWD come to Wisconsin? CWD was first found in deer and elk in northern Colorado in the mid-1980s. Since then, more cases of CWD have been found in Nebraska, South Dakota, Wyoming, New Mexico, and now Wisconsin. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources has collected samples for testing at deer registration stations during the gun deer season since 1999. It is unclear what happened to bring the disease to Wisconsin, but Wisconsin's high deer population may be a contributing factor. The disease appears to be contagious in deer but, after years of research, there is no evidence that the disease can jump to humans.



What is the status of CWD in Wisconsin in 2004? Of 56,422 deer harvested and tested for CWD since 2002, 326 animals have tested positive for infection with CWD. In the Intensive Harvest Zone west of Madison, 1.5% of deer have tested positive for the disease. The Herd Reduction Zone surrounds this area, and a small number of deer have tested positive in this zone (0.02%). The Intensive Harvest Zone and the Herd Reduction Zone are concentrated in the southwestern portion of the state, primarily in: Dane, Columbia, Green, Iowa, Lafayette, Sauk, Richland, Walworth and Rock counties. A very small number of deer have tested positive for the disease in the remainder of the state (0.01%). This means that 1 or 2 deer out of every 100 animals in the Intensive Harvest Zone will test positive for CWD. Outside the eradication zones, perhaps 1 or 2 deer out of 10,000 harvested will test positive. Fewer than 7,000 deer are donated to food pantries in Wisconsin every year.

Is venison from deer donation programs safe to eat? CWD has occurred in the U.S. for decades, and both the World Health Organization and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have found no scientific evidence that CWD can infect humans. Despite these reassurances, no one can predict with absolute certainty that CWD will *never* cause human disease. Absolute safety is not attainable in most life situations, and the current CWD situation is no exception. Meat processors have taken steps in handling deer to minimize any risk, however remote. For instance, the meat from deer is being boned-out, and fat and connective tissue removed. If your pantry receives only ground meat, you should not notice any change. If your pantry receives roasts or chops, you will notice that all cuts are boneless.

What are the current recommendations on distributing venison from food pantries? Food pantry staff may need to evaluate whether to accept venison donated to their program, just as you must evaluate the safety and wholesomeness of other perishable products such as ground beef or eggs that might be donated. The incidence of CWD in deer in the state remains low, and testing will continue. To further ensure that donated meat is safe, pantries should continue **not** to accept any home-processed venison.

For more information on CWD:

<http://www.datcp.state.wi.us/ah/agriculture/animals/disease/chronic/>

For more information on deer donation programs:

<http://www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/land/wildlife/damage/donation>

For information on handling deer carcasses and venison:

<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/ag/issues/fmd/index.html>

Safe Handling of Venison

This package contains venison, or the meat from deer. This venison was donated to your food pantry as part of a deer donation program for food pantries. This meat came from deer harvested in parts of the state where the deer have tested negative for chronic wasting disease.

Cook this venison as you would beef. It is very lean meat, and often is best when cooked in stews and sauces. As when handling any raw meat, be sure to follow these standard food safety steps:

Clean: wash your hands with warm, soapy water for 20 seconds before and after handling raw meat.

Chill: Refrigerate fresh meat for up to 3 days, or freeze for longer storage. Thaw frozen venison in the refrigerator. Avoid storing meat at room temperature for more than 2 hours. Chill leftovers promptly.

Cook: Cook ground venison to 160°F, venison roasts to 145°F. The juices should be clear, and the meat no longer pink.

Separate: Prevent cross-contamination by storing raw meat on a plate in the refrigerator, away from cooked meat and fresh vegetables and fruits. Wash cutting boards and knives in warm, soapy water after each use. Disinfect cutting boards, knives, and surfaces with a solution of 1 teaspoon bleach in 1 quart of water.



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