

## TIPS ON HANDLING VENISON

Dennis R. Buege  
Extension Meat Specialist  
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Scott R. Craven  
Wildlife Extension Specialist  
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Venison is a nutritious game meat that you can enjoy as roasts, steaks, and ground venison; or use it as an ingredient in various kinds of sausages. How you handle venison just after the kill affects the wholesomeness and eating quality of the final product. Proper care begins as soon as you down the deer.

Key points when handling venison are: One -- keep it clean, two -- keep it dry, and three -- keep it cold. These tasks aren't always easy to accomplish under the wide ranging conditions you may find when you handle the deer carcass, but here are some tried and tested tips you can use to help assure safe and good tasting venison.

You do not need to further "bleed" a downed deer. Remove the viscera from the body cavity as soon as possible, especially if the deer was hit in the gut area. Be careful not to cut into the intestines, stomach or bladder.

If intestinal contents have spilled in the body cavity or if the cavity is very bloody, use a clean cloth or toweling to clean up. Some recommend thoroughly rinsing out the cavity with cold water soon after the deer has been killed. However, it is very important that the cavity dries out quickly. Bacteria thrive in water, especially in warm weather. Spread apart the walls of the body cavity with a clean stick to promote drying and cooling.

If you plan on saving the heart or liver, carry a clean, food-grade plastic bag with you. In most cases leave the hide on the deer until you have it processed; this keeps the meat surface clean and fresh.

To slow bacterial growth and improve meat quality, the carcass should chill to under 50 degrees within six hours. You can improve cooling by propping open the body cavity, keeping the carcass in the shade and exposing it to air movement. Never transport a carcass on the warm hood of a car. If the carcass freezes within the first six hours in extremely cold weather, the meat may toughen. In such cases, you can slow chilling by putting the carcass in a garage or shed, or by wrapping something around it. If you have the deer processed at a meat plant, get to the plant as soon as possible to place the carcass under controlled temperature conditions.

"Aging" refers to holding carcasses at 35-45 degrees to allow naturally present enzymes to tenderize the meat. The tenderizing does not occur if the carcass is frozen, and proceeds more quickly at temperatures above 45 degrees. Opinions differ on if and how long venison should be aged. Some feel young deer need little aging, while others believe older deer may be improved by five to six days of aging. You must weigh the possible benefits of aging against the drying of exposed surfaces and possible bacterial spoilage accompanying longer aging periods. In warm weather, it's risky to try to age venison, and it is better to process it as soon as possible. If you have an entire carcass made into sausage, it does not need aging.

If you're cutting up the deer yourself or preparing the meat for sausage making, trim off dehydrated areas or areas that show signs of spoilage such as discolored lean and fat, objectionable odors, or sliminess. Be especially careful when skinning and handling venison to remove stray hairs. Many people like to remove most surface fat from the meat, since venison fat goes rancid rapidly, and can produce off-flavors.

Although thorough cooking may destroy any spoilage bacteria that are present, the products of their growth remain in the meat and can lead to off-flavors and other defects. Highly contaminated trimmings do not yield quality sausage, and may be refused by the processor.

Don't use black garbage bags for storing venison trimmings destined for sausage making. These bags are often made from recycled plastics and are not intended, or approved, for food use. Instead, store venison in clear or white food-grade plastic bags, or rigid plastic containers. Some meat plants can provide the proper storage bags to you.

For more information on venison, consult UW-Extension bulletin number G1598 -- *So You Got a Deer*. For venison recipes, see UW Extension Bulletin B3595 - - *Wisconsin's Wild Game: Enjoying the Harvest*.

**Nutrient Comparison of Venison, Beef and Pork**  
Per 3 ounce cooked, trimmed serving

	<u>Venison*</u>	<u>Beef Loin</u>	<u>Pork Loin</u>	<u>Chicken Breast</u>	<u>Chicken Thigh</u>
Calories	135	180	170	120	150
Protein (grams)	26	24	26	24	21
Total Fat (grams)	3	8	7	1.5	7
-----					
---					
Saturated Fat (grams)	1	3	3	0.5	2
Cholesterol (mg)	95	65	70	70	80
Iron (mg)	4	2	1	1	1

Source: USDA Nutrient Database for Standard Reference  
(<http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/foodcomp/>)

\*USDA nutrient information does not specify a particular cut for venison.