

Guide to Care and Handling of Deer



University of Illinois Extension

You can savor the hunt at the dinner table if the game meat is handled properly along the way. Game meats are excellent sources of protein and are similar in composition to domestic animal meats. Calorie and fat contents vary with the age and species of the animal.

Properly handling the meat—from the field to the table—helps ensure the best possible eating quality. A 3-ounce portion of game meat (before cooking) provides about half the daily adult protein requirement and about 130 to 150 calories. Game meats are often slightly lower in total fat, but higher in polyunsaturated fats than grain-fed beef.

Venison (deer meat) can be used much like you would use beef. Loins and steaks can be pan-fried. Roasts are delicious when cooked in a crock pot with vegetables. And ground venison can be substituted for ground beef in most of your favorite recipes including meat loaf, lasagna, sloppy joes, casseroles and spaghetti, just to name a few.

Read on for helpful tips on handling and caring for the game you bag.



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More food safety
information is available
from your local
University of Illinois
Extension office.

CARE IN THE FIELD

- Be prepared for the hunt. Bring protective gloves, a sharp hunting knife, a small hatchet or saw, about 12 feet of light rope or nylon cord, plastic bags and clean cloths or paper towels.
- If Chronic Wasting Disease is a concern, you can bone out the meat to avoid brain and spinal tissue.
- In warm weather you may want to bring a can of ground pepper and some cheesecloth. The carcass can be sprinkled with pepper and covered with cheesecloth to repel flies.
- Field dress and cool the carcass promptly. Improper temperature is meat's worst enemy. Without proper chilling, the surface of the carcass may be contaminated with bacteria that can spoil the meat.
- Clean your hunting knife often with clean water and a cloth to avoid contaminating the meat.
- Cool the carcass quickly by propping the chest open with a clean stick and allowing air to circulate. You can also fill the cavity with bags of ice to enhance cooling.
- To aid cooling in warm weather, the deer may be skinned if you have a way to keep the carcass clean. Use ground pepper and cheesecloth to protect the skinned carcass from contamination.
- In cool weather (28° F. to 35° F.), wrap the carcass or quarters in a sheet and hang to chill in a ventilated shed.
- Do not allow the carcass to freeze. Freezing may toughen the meat.
- Keep the carcass clean. Remove all foreign particles and loose hair. Remove any bloodshot areas.

- Wipe out excess blood in the body cavity with a paper towel or clean cloth and clean water. Use as little water as possible, because damp meat spoils faster than dry meat.
- Do not use grass or snow to wipe out the carcass because these may contaminate the meat.

CARE IN TRANSPORT AND PROCESSING

- Keep the carcass cool during transport. Do not tie a deer carcass across the hood of the car or put a warm carcass in the trunk.
- The game may be processed commercially or at home. Keep the carcass cool until it is processed. Also, keep the carcass out of direct sunlight and allow for adequate air circulation.
- If you process the venison at home, don't cross-contaminate. Wash knives, hands and cutting board often using warm, soapy water. Sanitize cutting boards with a solution of 1 teaspoon chlorine bleach per 1 quart of water.
- *Aging meat* is the practice of holding carcasses or cuts of meat at 34° F. to 37° F. for several days. This allows the enzymes in the meat to break down some of the complex proteins in the carcass. Aging meat for two to three days is usually sufficient. Aged meat is often more tender.
- Aging is not recommended for carcasses with little or no fat covering. They may dry out during aging.
- Leave the hide on and maintain the proper temperature when aging deer. If you do not have the proper cooler space, the carcass may spoil or dehydrate.
- If you intend to grind the meat into sausage, aging is not necessary.

CARE IN THE KITCHEN

- For immediate use, store the meat in the refrigerator and use within two or three days. Keep raw meat and cooked meat separate to prevent cross-contamination.
- Prevent *freezer burn* by using the right packaging materials.
- Divide meat into meal-sized portions.
- Use moisture/vapor-proof wrap such as heavily waxed freezer wrap, laminated freezer wrap, heavy-duty aluminum foil or freezer-weight polyethylene bags.
- Press air out of storage packages before sealing.
- Label storage packages, indicating contents and date.
- Avoid overloading the freezer. Put in only the amount that will solidly freeze within 24 hours.
- Venison will keep 9 to 12 months in the freezer if properly wrapped.
- Thaw frozen meat in the refrigerator or microwave oven. Foods thawed in the microwave should be immediately cooked. Refrigerator-thawed meat should be used within one to two days.
- Cook game meats thoroughly.
- Game meats should be cooked to at least 160° F. to reduce risk of foodborne illness.
- Big game animals usually exercise more than domestic animals, so game meats may be drier and less tender. Moist heat methods such as braising (simmering in a small amount of liquid in a covered pot) may result in a better product. Chops and steaks may be pan fried or broiled.
- The distinctive flavor of game meats is mainly due to the fat they contain. To reduce the gamey flavor, trim all visible fat from the meat. If you wish, you can add other sources of fat to maintain the juiciness of the meat.
- Marinades can enhance the flavor of venison. Always marinate meat in the refrigerator.

