



# Proper Care and Handling of Venison from Field to Table

To reduce the risk of food-borne illness, hunters need to handle, process, and prepare deer properly, being careful to prevent contamination from the field to the table. This publication contains guidelines and helpful hints to help you ensure the food you're providing is safe.



**PennState Extension**

## Bring These Items When You Hunt

A sharp knife  
A small hatchet  
A whetstone or steel for sharpening  
Several feet of rope or nylon cord  
Six-inch rubber bands  
Clean cloths or paper towels  
Sealable storage bags  
A large cooler full of ice or snow  
Disposable gloves for dressing  
Clean drinking water

## Field Dressing

- To reduce the risk of exposure to disease, wear disposable gloves while handling deer.
- Use clean water, premoistened wipes, or alcohol swabs to clean the knife frequently or between cuts to avoid dragging bacteria into the meat.
- Place the deer on its back, elevate its front legs, and spread its hind legs. Support the carcass in this position with rocks or sticks.
- Cut around the anus to loosen the bung so it will come out when the entrails are removed. Tying off the bung with rope, cord, or rubber bands will prevent feces from contacting the carcass during removal.
- Using a clean knife, cut along the midline from the breastbone to the genitals. Make the cut by lifting the skin and muscle together.
- Avoid cutting the paunch and intestines; bacteria associated with foodborne illness may be found in these organs.
- If the organs smell offensive or exhibit greenish discharge, black blood, or blood clots in the muscle, do not consume meat from this carcass. Discard the carcass properly.
- Cut the diaphragm free from the rib cage.
- Cut the windpipe and gullet at the base of the throat.
- Pull out the lungs, heart, and entrails. Place variety meats in a plastic storage bag and store on ice or refrigerate as soon as possible.

## Hints for Field Dressing

- Dress the carcass as soon as possible.
- Remove all visible dirt, feces, hair, and bloodshot areas.
- Wipe out the cavity with individual paper towels. Prop the cavity open with a clean stick or hang the carcass to aid in air circulation.
- If you wash the cavity with water, dry the area quickly to prevent spoilage.

- To prevent bacterial growth, quickly cool the carcass to 35–40°F (3–4°C).
- After cleaning the cavity, you can place ice or clean snow ***sealed in plastic storage bags*** and pack them in the cavity. Secure the bags in place by tying the cavity shut with rope or cord.
- Keep the carcass out of direct sunlight and allow for adequate air circulation.
- The hide should be left on the carcass during transport to protect the meat from contamination and to prevent it from drying out.

## Transporting and Processing Game

- Keep the carcass cool during transport. Keep it out of sunlight. Do not tie the deer across the hood or roof of a car. Do not put a deer in the trunk while it's still warm. Allow for adequate air circulation.
- Transport the eviscerated carcass to the processing facility as soon as possible. Processing should be done only by businesses with fully refrigerated facilities.
- If you are processing your own game, hold the carcass at 40°F (4°C) or lower. Freezing the carcass before rigor may toughen the meat.
- If aging the carcass, do so at 40°F (4°C) or below for two to three days, at most.
- If you are using the meat for sausage, aging is not necessary.
- During processing, frequently clean your knife between cuts to avoid contaminating the meat.
- Wash your knife, hands, and cutting boards often with warm, soapy water.

## Kitchen Processing

- Store any unfrozen meat in the refrigerator, and use it within two or three days.
- Keep raw meat separate and on trays with a lip to prevent cross-contamination in the refrigerator.
- If marinating, do so in the refrigerator.
- Thaw all frozen meats in the refrigerator; under cold, running water; or microwave and cook immediately.
- To reduce the risk of foodborne illness, cook all game meat to the correct final internal temperature: whole cuts, steaks, and roasts to 145°F (63°C) (medium rare); ground meat to 160°F (71°C); soups, stews, casseroles, and leftovers to 165°F (74°C); and jerky to 160°F (71°C) before drying. Use a calibrated food thermometer to ensure proper cooking temperature is reached.
- Jerky should be dried sufficiently after processing and can be stored for one to two months under refrigeration (< 40°F [4°C]).

- Meat must be canned in a pressure canner. Dial gauge canners should be checked yearly for accuracy. Follow guidelines from USDA, the National Center for Home Food Preservation, or your local extension office.
- Thoroughly clean and sanitize all equipment, including the tabletop meat grinder, before and after use.

## Freezing Tips

- Cut and package the meat into meal-size portions (about one pound).
- Use heavily waxed paper, freezer wrap, heavy-duty aluminum foil, vacuum bags, or plastic freezer storage bags for meat storage.
- Wrap meat tightly, and remove all air from the bag before sealing.
- Using a permanent marker, label packages with contents and dates.
- Space packages in the freezer to allow proper air circulation for cooling and freezing.
- Once packages are solidly frozen (within 24 hours), you can restack them within the freezer.
- Properly wrapped game meat will store in the freezer for 9–12 months. According to the Pennsylvania Game Commission, it is legal to have venison in home freezers year-round.
- To avoid quality deterioration, do not refreeze thawed products.

For more information about food safety, contact Penn State's Department of Food Science at 814-865-5444 or visit the Penn State Extension food safety website at **[extension.psu.edu/food-safety-and-quality](https://extension.psu.edu/food-safety-and-quality)**.

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