

Hunting Down Food Safety

Hunting season is here, and with it comes the opportunity to eat game meat and wild birds. These are nutritious foods, and most are naturally lean because of the animal's diets and high levels of physical activity. (Two exceptions are duck and goose, which have higher levels of fat than other poultry.) before eating wild game or birds, however, keep in mind food safety points:

Handling in the Field and during Processing. Do you know if care was taken regarding safe handling of the meat? Was the animal or bird "field dressed" promptly? Was the meat protected from contamination? Was it cooled quickly, and kept cool during the drive home? If you are a hunter yourself, know how to ensure food safety in handling the meat of game animals and wild birds, both in the field and during processing. For instance, follow the advice provided in the links at www.ksre.edu/foodsafety/p.aspx?tabid=33

Storage. If you will use it within three days, store game meat in the refrigerator. Keep raw meat and cooked meat separate to prevent cross contamination. Immediately freeze any extra meat. Prevent "freezer burn" by dividing meat into meal-size quantities and using moisture and vapor-proof containers or wrap. Press the air out of the packages before sealing, and label them with name of the contents and date. Freeze only the amount of meat that will solidly freeze within 24 hours. For best quality, use the frozen meat within one year.

Thawing. Thaw meat in a refrigerator, then cook the thawed meat within two days. Or, thaw it on the "defrost" setting in a microwave oven and then fully cook the meat immediately afterwards. Keep raw meat separate from cooked foods.

Preparation. Cook wild birds to at least 165°F., and game meats to at least 160° F. (Use a meat thermometer to check the internal temperature of the thickest part.) This will reduce your risk of getting a foodborne illness. Wild game tends to be drier and less tender than other meat, and often has a very distinctive flavor. To serve wild game that is juicy and tender, use a cooking method that adds liquids, such as stewing. You can reduce the "gamey" flavor by cutting the fat off game meats before cooking them. You can also mask that flavor by using extra spices or marinades. Marinating will also help tenderize the meat. Marinate all meats in the refrigerator. Recipes featuring 25 different kinds of wild game may be found at www.ces.ncsu.edu/martin/wildrecipes/list.html