



LEAD FRAGMENTS IN GROUND VENISON

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

In late March 2008, the North Dakota departments of Health, Agriculture, and Game and Fish advised food pantries across the state not to distribute or use donated ground venison because of the discovery of contamination with lead fragments. A few weeks later, the Minnesota departments of Health, Agriculture and Natural Resources made a similar advisory after laboratory tests discovered lead in venison that had been donated to food pantries in Minnesota.

The steps that were taken in response to the discovery of lead are similar to precautions taken when any food product is found to be contaminated. According to the North Dakota Department of Agriculture, if these lead fragments had been found in beef, the meat would have been recalled.

The recommendations offered here are based on the information we currently have. As more information becomes available, these recommendations may change.

How was the lead discovered?

A Bismarck physician and hunter contacted the Department of Health with concerns about the potential of lead fragments from bullets in ground venison. He collected 95 packages of ground venison that had been donated for food pantries. He took X-rays of the packages, which detected the presence of metal in 53 packages. The Department of Health took five samples targeting some of the metal pieces, all five of which tested positive for lead by an accredited laboratory in Iowa.

Why was distribution of the venison halted?

Because of the seriousness of lead poisoning, especially for children and pregnant women, the departments of Health, Agriculture, and Game and Fish took precautionary measures by recommending that food pantries not distribute the ground venison remaining in their possession. The agencies also suggested that anyone who had concerns about how their venison was cleaned and processed should not serve it to children and may decide whether to eat it themselves.

How did the lead get into the ground venison?

According to the Game and Fish Department, many lead bullets fragment to some degree when penetrating an animal. Hunters who cut up their own deer, as well as commercial processors, are careful to remove meat that appears damaged; however, there are no official regulations concerning this issue.

What are the health problems associated with exposure to lead?

Swallowing lead can cause serious health problems and, in extreme cases, even coma and death. Most of the time, however, the effects are subtle and can't be easily seen.

In young children, lead can cause:

- Lower IQs.
- Learning disabilities.

- Stunted growth.
- Kidney damage.
- Attention deficit disorder (ADD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

In pregnant women, high lead exposure can cause:

- Low birth-weight babies.
- Premature births.
- Miscarriage.
- Stillbirth.

In adults, lead can cause:

- High blood pressure.
- Hearing loss.
- Infertility.

Although we know exposure to lead can cause health problems, we don't know how much of this type of lead is absorbed by the human body when swallowed. More research is needed in this area.

Anyone who is concerned about possible exposure to lead may want to talk to his or her doctor about testing for blood lead levels.

Should I continue to eat venison and other wild game shot with lead bullets?

Most pieces of lead bullets should be removed during the dressing process, but even if properly processed, there is still a chance some pieces will remain in the meat. Because of the seriousness of lead poisoning, we advise that anyone who is concerned about how their wild game was cleaned and processed should not serve it to children or pregnant women, and may decide whether to eat it themselves.

What are the next steps?

Over the next few months, we will be working to find answers to our questions concerning this issue. Other states are conducting tests, and we welcome the information they can provide.

The Department of Health has added questions about eating venison to the screening process used when investigating cases of high blood lead levels. In addition, the Department of Health and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is conducting a study testing blood lead levels of more than 700 North Dakotans. It is hoped that the study will determine if people who eat venison have higher levels of lead in their blood than people who do not eat venison. We expect preliminary results before hunting season 2008. The departments of Health, Agriculture, and Game and Fish will be developing guidance for hunters and processors about how to properly clean and dress wild game to reduce the chances of lead in meat. That guidance should be ready before this fall's hunting season.

Where can I get more information?

Information about lead can be found on the following websites:

- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency – www.epa.gov/lead/
- National Institutes of Health – www.niehs.nih.gov/health/topics/agents/lead/index.cfm
- U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – www.cdc.gov/lead/

Questions about the health effects of lead can be directed to the North Dakota Department of Health at 701.328.2372.

Questions about venison processing can be directed to the North Dakota Department of Agriculture at 701.328.2231.

Questions about cleaning wild game can be directed to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department at 701.328.6300.

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