



## GUEST OPINION ARTICLE

For Immediate Release:  
May 13, 2008

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*This guest opinion is by State Health Officer Terry Dwelle, M.D.  
Length: Approximately 645 words*

### **Statewide Study Is the Next Step in Determining if Lead Bullets Cause Any Health Risks**

**By State Health Officer Terry Dwelle, M.D.**

Beginning May 16, 2008, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the North Dakota Department of Health will conduct a study measuring the risk, if any, of consuming wild game harvested with lead bullets. I appreciate this opportunity to explain the reasons for the study and what we hope to learn as a result.

Earlier this year, a local doctor contacted the Department of Health about the discovery of metal fragments in ground venison donated for food pantries across the state. Laboratory testing identified the metal as lead. Because of the seriousness of lead poisoning, especially for children and pregnant women, the departments of Health, Agriculture, and Game and Fish advised food pantries across the state not to distribute or use the donated ground venison. 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. A few weeks later, Minnesota issued a similar advisory based on testing conducted in that state.

Basically, the steps that were taken 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.

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The particles of lead discovered in the ground venison were not distributed evenly throughout the meat. In addition, many of the lead particles were so small that a person biting into the meat wouldn't notice the metal. However, even microscopic amounts of lead can cause health problems. That's why our most prudent option was to advise disposal of the meat.

Although there is no safe level of lead in blood, the risks are greater for young children and pregnant women. In young children, lead in the blood can cause lower IQs, learning disabilities, stunted growth, kidney damage and even death. In pregnant women, high lead exposure can cause low birth-weight babies, miscarriage and stillbirth. In adults, lead exposure can cause high blood pressure, hearing loss and infertility. In general, children are at higher risk because they absorb more lead than adults do and their developing brain is easily damaged by the lead.

Most of the time, however, the effects are subtle and can't be easily recognized, and most people with elevated levels of lead in their blood probably don't realize it. Lower IQ, high blood pressure and hearing loss may be blamed on other factors without consideration of lead exposure as a contributing factor.

Scientific studies can tell us how much lead is absorbed from sources such as paint or lead dust. What is still unclear is how much of the type of lead discovered in the venison is absorbed by the human body.

As I mentioned earlier, the CDC and the Department of Health will conduct a study at several sites across North Dakota beginning May 16 that will attempt to determine whether eating wild game harvested with lead bullets results in increased blood lead levels. The study will test the blood lead levels of 680 people of all ages and will compare blood lead levels of people who eat venison with the lead levels of those who don't. Analysis of the blood samples and the data collected will take several months; however, we anticipate that preliminary results will be available before the fall hunting season.

Because this study will be an important opportunity to help us understand any potential health effects of swallowing lead bullet fragments, I encourage both hunters and non-hunters alike to participate. Testing sites and schedules are available on the Department of Health website at [www.ndhealth.gov](http://www.ndhealth.gov) or by calling 701.328.2372.

Lead exposure is a serious issue. We are hopeful that this study will help us learn if there are any risks for people who eat wild game killed with lead bullets. We are committed to keeping you, the public, informed about whatever we discover.

-- 30 --