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Given Harper on Study Showing Lead Contamination in Illinois Venison

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WGLT Interview with Given Harper, October 23, 2020

Charlie Schlenker: Hunters use lead shot to cull the deer population often with shotgun that use really small pellets lead is poisonous does lead make it into venison harvest and sold in central Illinois a new study done by two Illinois Wesleyan university professors show yes it does and that's bad Given Harper and Aaron Schultz Wilson say the odds are pretty good there's lead in that venison.

Given Harpe: So we found in 27 firearm harvested uh ground venison packets from 10 different deer uh we found lead fragments in actually 48 % of the packets.

Aaron Schultz Wilson: Also, the size of the fragments is actually fairly small I think that's why they don't get noticed during the processing of the deer they don't get removed. Any exposure to lead is bad there no as far as we know there is no bottom limit to where you can say well if you eat this much lead your ok it's just the more we study it the further down that bottom kind of goes that bottom threshold.

Schlenker: How fast does lead leach into a persons system? So for instance if one were to have a meal of deer or venison with lead shot into it is that going to stay in the body longer and be absorbed more, than say chips of lead paint among children which is the more commonly known problem for lead?

Wilson: The fragments are not going to be taken out this whole amount of lead in like a little fragment of lead shot its not going to be taken by the body very efficiently and in fact adults only take up about 15% somewhere in there of the lead that they ingest on the other hand children who are exposed to lead children's bodies are better at assimilating at lead and they're going to take about 50% or half the lead they ingest. Once it's in your system it can stay for a long time. It can get into your bones.

Schlenker: What made you want to tackle this problem? What made you want to look at it, Given?

Harper: Uh actually, I am a deer hunter. I had read um, a paper about uh, lead contamination in venison but that was with hunters using rifles and of course in Illinois hunters use mostly shotguns, some muzzleloaders. So I was curious, and so I decided to get some venison packets from different hunters to see what extent lead contamination was in the ground venison from shotgun slugs.

Schlenker: 48 percent seems like a lot it would seem like a hazard that might have been noticed earlier.

Wilson: Yeah again most of the studies though had been done with uh riffle bullets and those bullets travel at a faster rate of speed and tend to fragment more than shotgun slugs.

Schlenker: What do most hunters hunt with?

Harper: So in Illinois it's about 90% of the deer that have been killed over the past uh several years have been harvested with shot guns.

Schlenker: So is there likely a need to require a change in the production of ammunition and how would that play out in the legislature of war among hunters it sounds like it might be more expensive to have steel slugs

Harper: You know there's non toxic, non lead ammunition available and based on the results of our study, certainly we would encourage hunters to use those ah, non toxic ammunition.

Schlenker: Are there comparable studies in other states that replicate this result?

Wilson: When we started looking at some of those other studies, so there had been studies in Canada and there had been studies in Europe, primarily where we were able to get numbers, so the amount of lead or concentration of lead. Um, whereas studies from the United States, there have been some great studies looking at the presence of fragments, but not as many studies saying ok, once we've found a fragment, this is how much lead was actually in the meat.

Schlenker: Is it likely that, uh, there needs to be regulation? I mean lead is cheaper and lead is traditional is that just something we need to move away from?

Harper: I know the state of California has enacted a lead ammunition ban and one of the major problems encountered there was that the endangered California condors that was their major mortality issue is that they were feeding on carcasses that had been the animals had been killed with lead ammunition and they were dying of lead poisoning.

Schlenker: What are you going to do with this study what's next?

Harper: We hope that it will increase awareness especially among hunters, because the concern about their health and the health of their families. Um, but I think there an issue as well is that there has been a state wide program of hunters donating deer to food pantries, there may be a concern there too. Um, I also want to point out were certainly not arguing against um, hunting. For years I used lead ammunition but once I discovered this I switched to non toxic ammunition so hunting is vital and controlling the deer population

Schlenker: The paper in the bulletin of environment contamination and toxicology is led contamination in ground venison from shot gun harvested white tailed deer in Illinois. The lead authors are Illinois Wesleyan Universities Aaron Shultz Wilson and Given Harper along with Genevieve Alexander, Manori Perera and veterinarian Matt Fraker of Bloomington Normal. The paper also notes that meat processors tend to mix meat from multiple deer when they grind venison. Grinding may also further fragment the lead shot deer. Deer season beings November 14th in Illinois.