

Approaching the Festive Season

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It is no secret that Trinbagonians love their wild meat and what better time

to indulge than at Christmas time. This is not uncommon as cultures all over the world consume wild meat. However, from a health perspective, one must remember that these are wild animals that have not been domesticated or reared in a controlled environment with regulated diets or check-ups meant to monitor their health. Some of these animals are hosts to a variety of parasites. These parasites live their entire life in the host animal and leave or die when it dies while others just use them (the hosts) as a means to enter humans, which are their final host. Such diseases are termed zoonoses. There are a myriad of diseases to which one can fall victim, one such disease includes a zoonosis-*Trichinella* sp-long associated with undercooked meat from carnivorous animals infected with the larvae of the worm. This disease may sound familiar as it also occurs in domestic pigs. Symptoms include diarrhoea, nausea, abdominal discomfort, fatigue and fever which may be followed by muscle pains, aching joints, itchy skin and swelling of the eyes. Many of the symptoms of mild and moderate infections subside during a few months; however, weakness, fatigue and diarrhoea can last for months. Heavy infections can cause heart and breathing problems as well as difficulty in coordinating movements, while severe cases can result in death.

Most people associate Salmonella with food poisoning, however, many reptiles are carriers of this bacterium. This brings me to another popular animal, a reptile, killed for consumption as wild meat-the Iguana. The symptoms include diarrhoea, abdominal cramps and fever. This is considered a self-limiting disease and usually lasts between two and seven days. Another self-limiting disease is the liver disease caused by the virus hepatitis E, which can be contracted from consuming the uncooked meat of wild boar and deer.

The animals that are devoured are not the only victims of zoonoses; there are the hunters who go into the forests to get them. Also, there are adventurous souls that might want to venture into the forest to get their own prey; after all, it might make a good story to tell among friends at Christmas time. Consuming wild meat is not the only means of getting infected, contact with blood and body fluids during hunting and the cutting up of the meat is another way that these diseases can be transmitted to humans. These parasites or pathogens come in a variety of forms, such as worms-trematodes (*Fasciola* sp), cestodes (*Taenia* sp), nematodes (*Trichinella* spp.) and protozoa (*Toxoplasma*). Others include Chagas disease, not to mention the host of others transmitted by mosquitoes, such as dengue, malaria and yellow fever.

Chagas disease is caused by the protozoan *Trypanosoma cruzi*, which is transmitted, to humans who are bitten by the insect vector belonging to the family Reduviidae and has gained the common name

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the "kissing bug". Early symptoms may be just a swelling at the bite site. With time, chronic symptoms include malformation of the intestines as well as heart disease, and if left untreated death often occurs. Thus, it may be detected too late, sometimes after the person has already died from a heart attack.

The forests of this country are teeming with mosquitoes especially during this time of year-the rainy season. Heavy rains, which have saturated the soil below, settle on the top in puddles that are hidden by the grass and dense understory vegetation in some cases, thereby providing mosquitoes with ideal breeding grounds. One of the prominent diseases-dengue or dengue haemorrhagic fever-also commonly known as "breakbone fever"-is caused by four closely related virus serotypes of flavivirus and transmitted to humans by the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito. It is so-called because of the sudden onset of muscle pains, joint pains and headaches. A rash may also occur which is bright red and usually appears first on the lower limbs and chest, and eventually spreads to the entire body. Some persons may experience gastritis along with nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea and abdominal pain. Currently, there is no vaccine against this disease and the primary preventative method is mosquito control, which includes destroying the habitats in which they breed. This would entail removing or covering vessels containing stagnant water and fogging areas with insecticides.

Please keep in mind that only a few zoonoses are mentioned in this article, as the number of zoonoses that occur is close to a hundred. So please, this Christmas season exercise caution when you go to take a bite of wild meat.