

How do you like walrus? Well done is best amid outbreak

July 7 2017, by Dan Joling



In this July 17, 2012, file photo, adult female walrus rest on an ice flow with young walrus in the Eastern Chukchi Sea, Alaska. If walrus is in your dinner plans, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends you make sure it's well done. The federal health agency warned of the effects of undercooked game meat after two outbreaks of trichinosis over the last year in western Alaska. The outbreaks sickened 10 people and all have fully recovered. (S.A. Sonsthagen/U.S. Geological Survey via AP, File)

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It was the first multiple-case outbreaks of trichinosis associated with walrus, which can only be hunted by Alaska Natives for subsistence or handicraft purposes, since 1992.

The CDC in its weekly online morbidity and mortality report dated July 7 urged health care givers to consider consumption of wild game when evaluating suspected trichinosis cases.

Trichinosis is contracted by eating raw or [undercooked meat](#) from animals infected with a microscopic roundworm. High heat kills the parasite.

Historically, the disease was most frequently associated with eating undercooked pork. Since the late 1990s, wild game is the suspected cause in most cases.

Often in Alaska, it's black bear or polar bear meat. However, among the 241 trichinosis cases reported in Alaska since 1975, 24 were associated with eating undercooked seal and 100 were tied to walrus.

In the recent cases, a girl in mid-August reported pain and swelling in her legs, difficulty walking, an itchy rash, fever and muscle pain. Blood tests found that she, her brother and father had symptoms of parasitic infection. All three had eaten walrus on July 17 that was pan-fried to "medium."

In September, staff at a Nome hospital treated the girl's uncle and aunt

about a week after they ate raw walrus. Alaska health officials counseled them and noted that the parasite in Arctic species can't be killed by smoking, drying or fermenting the meat.

The [outbreak](#) prompted a public service campaign warning of trichinosis before the spring walrus hunt.

In May, as the campaign began, state [health officials](#) were notified of an outbreak in a Norton Sound coastal community 100 miles (161 kilometers) from the first village. A man suffering severe muscle and joint pain received treatment in Nome.

He and four people from neighboring households had shared [walrus](#) boiled for an hour, which fully cooked the exterior but left the interior undercooked or raw, a taste and texture many people prefer.

Two people tested positive for trichinosis. Three showed symptoms but may have tested negative because of the time elapsed between infection and testing.

Early signs of infection show up a day or so after eating and can include diarrhea, stomach pain, fatigue, nausea and vomiting. Symptoms that show up typically in one to two weeks include swelling in the face, fatigue, fever, muscle soreness, itching and difficulty coordinating movement.

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