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## Better Living for Texans



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Jan./Feb.2014

### DID YOU KNOW...

#### January: National Soup Month

What's better on a cold winter day than a warm bowl of soup? Soup can be nutritious, easy to prepare, and inexpensive. It can be great hot or cold, prepared with minimal clean-up, only needs one pot, and the combination of ingredients is unlimited. Soup is a great dish for a variety of palettes and can be tailored to be spicy, savory or sweet. January, a good time to think about how soup can fit into a healthy eating plan. Follow these helpful tips for making soup delicious and nutritious.

#### Tips for Delicious and Nutritious Soup:

**Soup for every season.** As appetizers, side dishes, or the main dishes, soups help celebrate the bounty of the four seasons. Soups can be thick and hearty, smooth and creamy, or a savory bean. They can be served hot, such as minestrone, or cold, such as mango and cucumber soup.

**Be sodium savvy.** To keep soups tasty and healthy, use low-sodium broth, stock, or soup base for the foundation. Experiment with flavorful herbs and spices in place of salt. The most effective replacements are savory flavors, and flavors with "bite," such as black pepper, garlic powder, curry powder, cumin, dill seeds, basil, ginger, coriander and onion. Use minced or powdered garlic and onion rather than their salt form. When substituting minced or powdered garlic and onion for the salt version, use about half as much.

**Make healthier choices with Nutrition Facts Labels.** When buying canned soups, use the Nutrition Facts Label to help choose ones with a lower percent Daily Value (DV) for sodium. Foods with less than 140 milligrams (mg) sodium per serving can be labeled as low-sodium foods. Claims such as "low in sodium" or "very low in sodium" on the front of the food label can help identify foods that contain less salt.

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## Food Safety—Slow Cookers

**O**pening the front door on a cold winter evening and being greeted by the inviting smells of beef stew or chicken noodle soup wafting from a slow cooker can be a diner's dream come true. But winter is not the only time a slow cooker is useful. In the summer, using this small electrical appliance can avoid introducing heat from a hot oven. At any time of year, a slow cooker can make life a little more convenient because by planning ahead, you save time later. And it takes less electricity to use a slow cooker or crock pot rather than an oven.

### **Is a slow cooker safe?**

Yes, the slow cooker, a countertop electrical appliance, cooks foods slowly at a low temperature — generally between 170 °F and 280 °F. The low heat helps less expensive, leaner cuts of meat become tender and shrink less. The direct heat from the pot, lengthy cooking and steam created within the tightly-covered container combine to destroy bacteria and make the slow cooker a safe process for cooking foods.

### **Safe Beginnings**

Begin with a clean cooker, clean utensils and a clean work area. Wash hands before and during food preparation. Keep perishable foods refrigerated until preparation time. If you cut up meat and vegetables in advance, store them separately in the refrigerator. The slow cooker may take several hours to reach a safe, bacteria-killing temperature. Constant refrigeration assures that bacteria, which multiply rapidly at room temperature, won't get a "head start" during the first few hours of cooking.

### **Thaw Ingredients**

Always thaw meat or poultry before putting it into a slow cooker. Choose to make foods with a high moisture content such as chili, soup, stew or spaghetti sauce. If using a commercially frozen slow cooker meal, prepare according to manufacturer's instructions.

### **Use the right amount of food.**

Vegetables cook slower than meat and poultry in a slow cooker so if using them, put the vegetables in first. Large cuts of meat and poultry may be cooked safely in a slow cooker, however since slow cookers are available in several sizes, consult the instruction booklet for suggested sizes of meat and poultry to cook in your slow cooker. Then add the meat and desired amount of liquid suggested in the recipe, such as broth, water or barbecue sauce. Keep the lid in place, removing only to stir the food or check for doneness.

### **Settings**

Most cookers have two or more settings. Foods take different times to cook depending upon the setting used. Certainly, foods will cook faster on high than on low. However, for all-day cooking or for less-tender cuts, you may want to use the low setting. If possible, turn the cooker on the highest setting for the first hour of cooking time and then to low or the setting called for in your recipe. However, it's safe to cook foods on low the entire time — if you're leaving for work, for example, and preparation time is limited. While food is cooking and once it's done, food will stay safe as long as the cooker is operating.

### **Power Out**

If you are not at home during the entire slow-cooking process and the power goes out, throw away the food even if it looks done. If you are at home, finish cooking the ingredients immediately by some other means. When you are at home, and the food was completely cooked before power went out, food should remain safe up to two hours in the cooker with power off.

