

Fast Food with Slow Cookers



Imagine coming home at the end of the day with a great tasting meal already prepared and waiting for you. Does this sound too good to be true? Not if you have a slow cooker. Slow cookers can help busy people prepare meals on a budget, saving both money and time. If you are new to slow cooker cooking or want to get re-acquainted with one you already have, then the following information is just for you!

Testing Your Slow Cooker for Accuracy

If your slow cooker has been in the back of a cabinet for a while, test it for accuracy before you use it. Here is a simple way to test your slow cooker:

1. Fill the slow cooker 1/2 to 2/3 full with water.
2. Turn the slow cooker on to LOW and let heat for 8 hours. Do not lift the lid during this time!
3. Check the water temperature with an accurate food thermometer. Do this quickly since the temperature in the slow cooker drops 10 to 15 degrees once the lid is removed.
4. The temperature of the water should be between 185 and 200 degrees.

If the water temperature is less than 185 degrees, the slow cooker is not safe to use and should be replaced. If the temperature is over 200 degrees, then it is likely that food cooked in the slow cooker for 8 hours without any stirring will be overdone.

Tips for Safe and Successful Slow Cooking

1. Start with a clean cooker, utensils and work area. Wash hands before and during food preparation, especially after handling raw meat and poultry.
2. Spray the inside of the crock with non-stick cooking spray before adding ingredients to keep the food from sticking. This makes cleaning the crock easier.
3. Prepare foods that have high moisture content like as chili, soup, or spaghetti sauce. When using a commercially prepared frozen slow cooker meal, follow the instructions on the package.
4. Keep perishable foods refrigerated until preparation time. Meat and vegetables should be stored separately in the refrigerator in covered containers. It takes time for slow cookers to reach a temperature hot enough to kill bacteria so keeping these foods refrigerated helps ensure that bacteria, which multiply fast at room temperature, don't get a head start during the first few hours of cooking.
5. Always thaw meat or poultry before putting it into a slow cooker. **Never put frozen meat or chicken in a slow cooker.**
6. Depending on the age, the size of meat or poultry you cook in the slow cooker matters. Until recently, placing a whole roast or chicken in a slow cooker was not recommended. New research conducted by USDA FSIS suggests that **for newer models**, it is safe to cook large cuts of meat and poultry in a slow cooker. The newer models of slow cookers are larger and more powerful than the older ones, so it is safe to cook larger pieces of meat and poultry. If you have an older model, continue to cut your meat or poultry into smaller pieces before cooking.
7. Fill the cooker between 1/2 and 2/3 full. Vegetables such as potatoes and carrots cook slower than meat and poultry so place them at the bottom of the cooker. Be sure the liquid almost covers the ingredients so there is proper heat transfer throughout the crock. The liquid is needed to generate the steam that cooks the food.

8. Keep the lid on the slow cooker during the cooking process. Remove **only** to stir the food or check for doneness. Each time the lid is raised, the internal temperature drops 10 – 15 degrees and the cooking process is slowed by 20 to 30 minutes.

9. Use a food thermometer to make sure foods have been cooked to a safe internal temperature. Recommended temperatures are: poultry (165 degrees), ground beef (160 degrees), beef steaks and roasts (145 degrees) and pork (160 degrees).

10. Store foods cooked in the slow cooker in shallow, covered containers and refrigerate within two hours of cooking. Reheat foods to 165 degrees using an oven, microwave, or stove

top. Soups, stews and gravies should be brought to a rolling boil before eating.

11. If you are not home during the **entire** slow-cooking process and the power goes out, throw out the food - even if it looks done! If you are home when the power goes off, finish cooking the ingredients immediately by some other means: on a gas stove, on an outdoor grill, or even at another house where there is power. If this is not possible, throw out the food.

If you are home when the power goes off and **if** the food was already completely cooked, the food should remain safe for up to two hours in the cooker with the power off.