

ALL ABOUT SLOW COOKING

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Opening the front door on a cold evening and being greeted by the inviting smells of a home-cooked meal from a slow cooker can be a cook's dream come true! Using a slow cooker is very easy; just add the food, cover, turn on the heat and cook all day.

Slow cooker appliances cook foods slowly at a lower temperature, so vitamins and minerals are retained, tougher cuts of meat are tenderized and meats shrink less. Here are some of the greatest advantages of slow cooking:

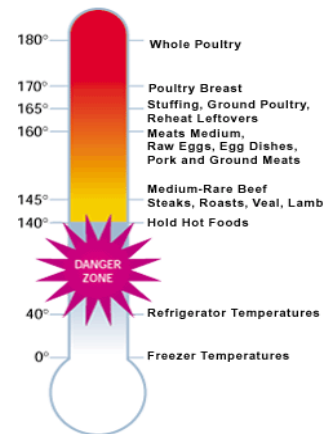
- The extended cooking times allow better distribution of flavors in many recipes.
- Tougher cuts of meats (chuck, flank, brisket, rump, and round) and poultry are tenderized through the long cooking process. The slow cooker is a good choice for cooking wild game dishes.
- The slow cooker frees the oven and stove top for other uses, and should definitely be considered as an option for large gatherings or holiday meals.
- The lower temperatures lessen the chance of scorching of foods which tend to stick to the bottom of a pan and burn easily in an oven.
- Convenience! A slow cooker can usually be left unattended all day for many recipes.

To qualify as a safe slow cooker, the appliance must be able to cook slowly enough for unattended cooking, yet fast enough to keep food above the danger zone temperature of 135°F. The LOW setting is about 200°F, and the HIGH setting is about 300°F. WARM is a holding temperature once the food has been cooked.

When you purchase a new slow cooker, use it the first few times, on HIGH and on LOW, before leaving it unattended. Also, remember to place the cooker on a cookie sheet, granite countertop, the stovetop, or a similar surface. The bottom can get quite hot.

To determine if a slow cooker will heat to a safe temperature:

1. Fill cooker with 2 quarts of water.
2. Heat on low for eight hours or desired cooking time.
3. Check the water temperature with an accurate thermometer quickly because the temperature drops 10 to 15 degrees when the lid is removed.
4. The temperature of the water should be at least 185°F. Temperatures above this would indicate that a product cooked for eight hours without stirring would be overdone. Temperatures below this may indicate the cooker does not heat food high enough or fast enough to avoid potential food safety problems.



A slow cooker is a safe process for cooking foods as long as correct procedures are followed.

- Always start with a clean slow cooker, clean utensils, a clean work area and clean hands.
- Keep perishable foods refrigerated until preparation time. If you cut up meat and vegetables in advance, store them separately in the refrigerator.
- Cut food into smaller pieces to help heat the food more thoroughly.

- Never put frozen foods in a slow cooker. They take much too long to heat up and stay in the temperature danger zone (between 40 and 135°F) for longer than the safe 2-hour limit.
- Vegetables cook more slowly than meats in the moist heat of the slow cooker so place them in the bottom of the slow cooker.
- Fill your slow cooker no less than half full and no more than two-thirds full. Place vegetables in first on the bottom and around the sides. Then add the meat and cover with liquid such as broth, water, or sauce.
- The U.S.D.A. recommends cooking on HIGH heat for the first hour to quickly bring the temperature up to 135°F. Then turn the dial to LOW and finish cooking. If prep time is limited, it is safe to cook foods on low for the entire time.
- One hour on HIGH is equal to two hours on LOW.
- Keep the lid on the slow cooker, removing it only to stir the food or check the temperature. Every time the lid is removed, heat escapes and that lowers the temperature of the food in the slow cooker.

Liquid, such as broth, is essential for slow cooking because less tender meats have greater amounts of collagen than tender ones. Collagen, a connective tissue, helps hold the muscle fibers in meat together. When cooked in the presence of moisture, collagen dissolves into gelatin, which allows the meat fibers to separate more easily. This is the essence of tenderizing tough cuts of meat.

While collagen softens in moist heat, muscle fibers firm. The higher the cooking temperature, the tougher the muscle fibers become, and the more they shrink in both length and width. To keep meat tender yet safe during cooking, you must maintain an important balance. Cooking temperatures must be high enough to kill microorganisms, yet not so high that the meat toughens. Use a thermometer to check the

temperature of the surrounding liquid and keep it at a simmer of 180-190°F.

- For best results, ground meats must be cooked in a skillet before cooking in the slow cooker.
- Large pieces of meat can be browned before cooking in the slow cooker, but this step isn't necessary. Most meats require 8 hours of cooking on LOW. Lean cuts of meat have less fat, which makes them more suited to slow cooker cooking. Moist, long cooking times result in tender meats.
- Remove skin from poultry, and trim excess fat from meats. Fats will melt with long cooking times, and will add an unpleasant texture to the finished dish. Fatty foods will also cook too quickly.
- Seafood and fish should be added during the last hour of cooking time, or it will overcook and have a rubbery texture.



- Beans used in soups don't need to be soaked before using if you are going to cook the soup on high for 3-4 hours before being turned down to low. Sugar and foods high in acid, such as tomatoes, will have a hardening effect on beans. Therefore, always soften the beans thoroughly before using in such recipes as chili or baked beans.
- Pasta and rice can be cooked in the slow cooker. Pasta needs lots of liquid to cook properly, and should be added during the last hour of cooking time, depending on the consistency of doneness preferred. Pasta will become very glutinous if added to a slow cooker when dry. Its best to parboil pasta to the tender but not completely cooked stage, then add.

- Rice can be more difficult to cook. Use brown or wild rice for better results. Make sure there is enough liquid in the recipe so the rice becomes tender.
- Potatoes can be prevented from darkening by rinsing in one cup of water and ½ teaspoon cream of tartar.
- Add tender vegetables like tomatoes, mushrooms, and zucchini during the last 45 minutes of cooking time so they don't overcook.



- Dairy products should be added during the last 30 minutes of cooking time, unless the recipes states otherwise.
 - Natural cheeses tend to break down, so should be replaced with process cheeses or other cheese made to melt nicely. Natural cheeses can be added near the end of cooking time.
 - Milk will curdle over long cooking times, but you can substitute evaporated milk or stir in heavy cream or sour cream near the end of cooking.
- Fresh herbs are recommended. Use whole herbs and spices instead of crushed or ground forms for better flavor. Add them in the last 30 minutes of cooking.
 - Pepper, cayenne pepper and Tabasco sauce tend to become bitter if cooked for long periods of time. Use small amounts and add toward the end of the cooking time.

- Liquids do not boil away in the slow cooker, so if making a recipe that wasn't specifically developed for the slow cooker, reduce the liquid by ⅓ to ½ unless you are cooking rice, pasta, or making soup.
- When thickening sauces near the end of cooking time, turn the heat setting to high to speed the process. Taste the liquid first, though; if it lacks flavor, it may be best to reduce by simmering several minutes uncovered.
- You can make cakes and desserts in the slow cooker! Use a small round rack or vegetable steamer to lift the cake pan off the bottom of the slow cooker so heat circulates evenly around the pan. A 5-quart slow cooker will hold an 8" or 9" cake pan or spring form pan.
- If you live at a high altitude, you may need to increase cooking times.

Many recipes can be converted to cooking in the slow cooker. Reduce the amount of liquid a recipe calls for, since liquids do not evaporate during slow cooker cooking. However, if you are cooking rice, beans, or pasta, don't reduce the liquid called for in the recipe. You generally need twice as much liquid as product to cook these ingredients. Here are basic conversion times:

- If conventional time is 15 to 30 minutes, then cooking time on low should be 4 to 6 hours.
- If conventional time is 35 to 45 minutes, cooking time on low should be 6 to 8 hours.
- If conventional time is 50 minutes to 3 hours, cooking time on low should be 8 to 16 hours.

If you use the slow cooker to keep foods warm, heat the food to steaming before placing it into the preheated slow cooker.

Slow cookers are a great time saver when it comes to preparing delicious and hearty meals. Where you don't want to spend your time is cleaning up after your meals. Here's a few tips to protect your slow cookers cooking surface and easy clean up tips.

- **Use a nonstick spray** – Even though most slow cookers already have a non-stick coating on the crockery insert, it's still important to spray it with a non stick spray before cooking. Otherwise you'll find you'll have to soak and scrub the food off after slow cooking your food.
- **Use spoons that are plastic or wood** – If you stir or remove food with a metal spoon, you'll damage the non stick surface and have a real tough time cleaning the insert in the future.
- **Don't preheat you're slow cooker** – Preheating may cause food to stick and burn to the surface of the insert. Only turn your slow cooker on after it's filled with ingredients. If you do want to preheat, you can first fill up the crockery insert with water for an hour. Then add your food.
- **Use slow cooker liner bags** – These bags look like a plastic bag but are really made from heat resistant nylon. You'll find them in the Ziploc Bag aisle of your local grocery store. You simply place in the liner of your slow cooker before you start cooking. After cooking, spoon out your ingredients into a food container and slowly take out the liner. It may not be best to use them for recipes that call for cooking times of 8 – 10 hours.
- **Handle stuck food properly** – Every now and again, no matter how much precaution you take, you'll find your food sticking. This is when having a slow cooker with a removable crockery insert comes in handy.

Simply let the appliance cool down, bring your insert to the sink and give it a 15-20 minute soak in hot soapy water. You can then scrub it with a nylon net pad, plastic sponge or cloth. Do not use a harsh abrasive cleaner, stainless steel soap pad or metallic scoring pad. Rinse well in hot water and dry. If you're food is really stuck on, fill the slow cooker with water and put it on high for an hour.

- **Remove mineral stains with vinegar** – Fill your slow cooker with 1 cup white vinegar and $\frac{3}{4}$ full with hot water. Cover and cook on high for 2 hours. Then let the crockpot cool and soak and clean as described above.
- **Remove water marks with vegetable oil** – If you have those ugly water marks on your glazed crockery insert, simply rub the surface with vegetable oil and let stand for 2-3 hours. Then fill with hot soapy water, rub the surface, and scrub with a nylon net pad. Rinse and dry well.

The slow cooker is one of the best time saving appliances in the kitchen. It's great for beginning cooks because all you have to do is fill it and turn it on. Hours later, you come home to a house filled with wonderful smells and dinner ready for the table. And once you become an expert at using this appliance, the time you spend in the kitchen will be greatly reduced!



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