



### **Slow Cooker (Crock Pot) Safety**

The slow cooker, or crock pot, is a great appliance for fixing family meals when following some easy safety tips. There is a concern about foods being in the temperature “danger zone,” 40-140 degrees F, for extended periods of time, as the food heats or cools. This is the temperature at which disease-causing bacteria rapidly multiply. When cooking food, a crock pot should heat food to at least 140 degrees within 2 hours or less.

To test your slow cooker’s temperature, heat two quarts of cold water on “low” for two hours. Keep the lid on. Check the water temperature with an accurate thermometer (quickly because the temperature drops 10 to 15 degrees when the lid is removed). The temperature of the water should be 185 to 200 degrees F. Temperatures below this may indicate the cooker does not heat food hot enough or fast enough to avoid potential food safety problems. Then try the same thing with the crock pot on “high.” This will give you a good idea about how to heat your foods fast enough to get them out of the danger zone within a two hour period.

Start out with a clean cooker, clean utensils and a clean work area. Wash your hands before, after, and during food preparation, as needed. Keep perishable food refrigerated until preparation time. Meat and vegetables may be cut up ahead of time and stored separately in the refrigerator. Refrigeration assures that bacteria don’t get a head start on multiplying, before reaching a safe, bacteria-killing temperature. Start cooking while you’re preparing for work, at “high” for 1-2 hours. Then, turn the temperature to “low” or to the recipe’s prescribed cooking temperature for the desired length of time.

Always defrost meat or poultry before putting it in the crock pot. Cut meats into smaller chunks or pieces to ensure thorough and accessible cooking. A slow cooker heats at approximately 190 degrees on low and 300 degrees on high. These temperatures are lower than recommended for safe

cooking in a conventional oven. The smaller confined space of the crock pot allows better temperature control than an oven. Because of this lower temperature, however, it is not safe to start with frozen meats or large pieces of meat. Thawing and heating does not take place fast enough to prevent bacterial growth in a crock pot with large or frozen pieces of meat.

Only prepare foods with a high moisture content, such as soups or stews. Keep the lid in place, removing it only to stir foods or to check for doneness. Do not fill the cooker more than two-thirds full. Vegetables cook more slowly than meats, in a slow cooker, so put them in first at the bottom and around the sides. Then add meat and cover the food with liquid, such as broth, water, or barbecue sauce.

Store leftovers within two hours after cooking, in shallow covered containers. Do not reheat them in the slow cooker. Reheat them on the stove or in the microwave to 165 degrees F. The slow cooker may then be used to keep the food hot!

For more information on crock pot cooking, check the University of Wyoming Extension Nutrition and Food Safety website at [www.uwyo.edu/foods](http://www.uwyo.edu/foods).

Sources: Food Safety and Inspection Service, United States Department of Agriculture, December 1994 and Iowa State University Cooperative Extension, 1993.

Wyoming Food Safety Coalition training members are from Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service; Wyoming Department of Agriculture; and City/County Health Departments.

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