

Kenna Knight
County Extension Agent for
Family and Consumer Sciences
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Put Your Slow Cooker to Work

Imagine the tantalizing aroma of chili or chicken soup greeting you as you return home after a hard day's work. A slow cooker and a little advance preparation will make this image a reality.

A slow cooker is best used for foods with a high moisture content such as chili, stew, spaghetti sauce or soup.

There are several advantages to using a slow cooker, or crock pot. It can reduce the time you spend in the kitchen by almost half. A slow cooker takes less electricity than an oven, and produces less heat during the warmer months. It also improves the variety and flavor of foods. Since this appliance cooks foods slowly at a low temperature, it tenderizes the less expensive and leaner cuts of meat and reduces shrinkage.

A slow cooker is designed for long hours of unattended cooking so don't remove the lid until it's time to check food doneness, unless you need to stir during cooking. This is because heat builds up slowly inside the cooker, and every time you uncover the pot it loses enough heat to slow the cooking process by 30 minutes or more.

It usually takes several hours for food to reach 125 degrees Fahrenheit, the temperature at which heat begins to destroy any bacteria present. Some bacteria can survive at temperatures up to 140 degrees F. A slow cooker should heat to 125 degrees F within three hours and to 140 degrees F within four hours, according to food safety experts. To kill all bacteria, the temperature must stay at 150 degrees F for at least one hour.

To get off to a safe start, use a clean cooker and utensils. Also, be sure to keep the work area clean and wash your hands before and during food preparation.

Always defrost meat or poultry before you put it in a slow cooker.

Keep perishable foods in the refrigerator until it's time to prepare them. If you cut up meat and vegetables in advance, refrigerate them in separate containers.

Cut food into small pieces or chunks to ensure thorough cooking. Don't use a slow cooker for large pieces of meat like a roast or whole chicken, because these will remain in the bacterial "damage zone" too long due to the slow cooking process.

Fill the slow cooker no less than half full and no more than two-thirds full.

Since vegetables cook more slowly than meat and poultry, put vegetables in the slow cooker first; then add the meat or poultry and cover the food with a liquid such as broth, water, gravy or barbecue sauce.

It's best to turn the cooker to the highest heat setting for the first hour of cooking, and then to low or the setting recommended in your recipe. You may want to use the low setting for all-day cooking or for less-tender cuts of meat.

While food is cooking, and once it's done, it will be safe as long as the slow cooker is operating. However, you shouldn't leave food to cool down in the cooker. Either immediately eat the food, or cool it rapidly and refrigerate in shallow, covered containers within two hours after cooking is finished.

Never reheat food in a slow cooker. Instead, bring it to a boil on the stove or in a microwave oven; then, put it in a pre-heated slow cooker to remain hot until it's time to serve the food.

Remember to carefully handle earthenware pots, and avoid extreme temperature changes that might cause them to break. Follow the manufacturer's cleaning instructions.

For more information, contact the Pendleton County Cooperative Extension Service.