

# Maximizing Kitchen Appliances - Slow Cookers



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One appliance commonly found in many of today's home kitchens is the versatile slow cooker. First introduced in the '70s, slow cookers remain popular among all age groups. Meals and dishes that take a long time to cook can be prepared when families aren't home or are busy. And, most of these recipes take little time and are very easy to prepare.

## Types and Features

Slow cookers now come in a variety of sizes and shapes. The basic cooker has a glazed ceramic container or crock which is housed in an outer heating element casing. Unlike many of the original cookers, newer versions often have removable ceramic containers that make for easier clean up. The lid is usually clear. Features may be as simple as two or three temperature settings or as complicated as programmable settings.

## Using the Cooker

Why use a slow cooker? These remain some of the frequently cited reasons:

- Convenience and time saving
- Money saving
- Excellent nutritional content of foods prepared in them
- Good cooking method for many foods especially less-tender meats
- Long term cooking develops flavors
- Family meals can be prepared "from scratch"



Recipes intended for other cooking methods – oven, top of stove, etc. – can be modified for slow cookers. Often water must be decreased. With a little practice and minor alterations, many traditional recipes can be successfully prepared in the slow cooker.

The cooker can be used in innovative ways. Use it as a cooker for rice or hot cereals. It will keep food warm and melted making it serve as a fondue pot for cheese or chocolate. Even hot beverages such as cider can be served from the slow cooker. Dinner rolls will warm without excessive drying.

## Safety

A slow cooker should cook slowly enough for unattended cooking yet fast enough to keep food out of the food safety danger zone (between 40°F and 140°F). Between these temperatures bacteria that might be present would grow very rapidly.

To determine if a slow cooker is operating at a sufficiently high temperature, use the following test:

1. Fill the slow cooker one-half to two-thirds full of water.
2. Heat on a low setting for 8 hours with the lid on.
3. Check the water temperature with an accurate food thermometer. The temperature of the water should be 185°F. Temperatures below this would indicate the slow cooker does not heat food enough or fast enough to avoid potential food safety problems. Replace the slow cooker if heating is inadequate.

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# Slow Cookers and Food Safety

## Is A Slow Cooker Safe?

Yes, the slow cooker, a countertop appliance, cooks foods slowly at a low temperature — generally between 170°F and 280°F. The low heat helps 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 slow cooking 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

Fill cooker no less than half full and no more than two-thirds full. If using vegetables, put them in first on the bottom and around the sides of the utensil because they take longer to cook. Next add meat and cover the food with liquid such as broth, water or barbecue sauce. Keep the lid in place, removing only to stir the food or check for doneness.

Reminders:

- Fill cooker no less than half full and no more than two-thirds full.
- Cover the food with liquid.
- Keep the lid in place.

## 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 when 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. If you are at home, finish cooking the ingredients immediately by some other means such as on a gas stove or on the outdoor grill. When you are at home, and if the food was completely cooked before the power went out, the food should remain safe up to two hours in the cooker.

## Handling Leftovers

Store leftovers in shallow covered containers and refrigerate within two hours after cooking is finished. Reheating leftovers in a slow cooker is not recommended. Cooked food should be reheated on the stove, in a microwave, or in a conventional oven until it reaches 165°F or comes quickly to a rolling boil. The hot food can then be placed in a preheated slow cooker to keep it hot for serving -- at least 140°F as measured with a food thermometer.

*Source: USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service*