

Slow Cooker Safety

What Is a Slow Cooker?

The slow cooker is a counter top appliance. It cooks foods slowly at a low temperature. The low heat helps cheaper, leaner cuts of meat become tender and shrink less.



Is a Slow Cooker Safe?

Yes. It cooks foods slowly at a low temperature - generally between 170° and 280° F. The slow cooker is a safe way for cooking foods because:

1. The direct heat from the pot.
2. Lengthy cooking time.
3. Steam created within the tightly-covered container.

By using all three ways, bacteria are killed.

Winter is not the only time, to use a slow cooker. In the summer, using this small appliance can avoid introducing heat from a hot oven. At any time of year, a slow cooker can make life a little easier because by planning ahead, you save time later. And it takes less electricity to use a slow cooker rather than an oven.

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 vegetables and meat in advance, clean the cutting board between items. Also, 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.

The seal between the lid and the rim of the pot should not be broken during cooking until it is time to test if the recipe is done.



Thaw and Cut Up Ingredients:

Cut food into chunks or small pieces to ensure thorough cooking. Do not use the slow cooker for large pieces like a roast or whole chicken. Large pieces of food will cook so slowly it could stay in the "danger zone" too long.

While food is cooking and once it's done, food will stay safe as long as the cooker is operating.

Check internal temperature to make sure food reaches 160°F. Do not delay starting time.

Food Safety Tips:

It may take several hours for the food in your slow-cook crock pot to reach 125°F when cooking at relatively low temperatures. This is the temperature at which heat begins to destroy any bacteria present. Until the temperature reaches 140° F, some bacteria can survive. Food safety experts say that a slow-cook crock pot should heat to 125° within three hours and to 140°F within four hours. The temperature must be maintained at 158°F for at least one hour to kill all bacteria.

To reduce any bacterial risk while using a slow-cook crock pot follow these simple guidelines:

- * Thaw frozen meat or poultry before cooking.
- * Cut vegetables in small pieces to ensure rapid heat transfer.
- * When cooking meat, the water or stock level should almost cover the meat to ensure effective heat transfer.
- * Do not overload the crock pot. Half full is the design of most crock pots.
- * Do not leave cooked food to cool down in the pot. Either consume it immediately or cool the food rapidly and refrigerate.
- * Never re-heat leftovers in the crock pot.
- * Always follow the manufacturer's instructions.

Learning the pattern of your slow cooker is the only thing you have to learn to produce a successful meal. Once you understand your cooker's particular timing, you will know how to adjust your recipe timing instructions so your home cooked tasting meals are ready at precisely the right moment!

Power Out:

If you are at home, finish cooking the ingredients immediately by some other means: on a gas stove, on the outdoor grill or at a house where the power is on.

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 with the power off.



If you are not at home during the entire slow-cooking process and the power goes out, throw away the food even if it looks done. Temperatures above this would indicate that a product cooked for 8 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.

Use the Right Amount of Food:

Settings:

- Fill cooker with 2 quarts of water.
- Heat on Low for 8 hours or desired cooking time.
- 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°F to 200°F. Most cookers have two or more settings. Generally, low means the food will be cooking at 200°F to 240°F high means the foods will be cooking at 300°F to 340°F. A general rule; cooking on low takes twice the amount of time it takes to cook the same recipe on high. The high setting can cause foods to dry out. Add more liquid or use a lower temperature.

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 - if you're leaving for work, for example, and preparation time is limited.

Handling Leftovers:

Store leftovers in shallow-covered containers and refrigerate within two hours after cooking is finished. Re-heating leftovers in a slow cooker is not recommended. However, cooked food can be brought to steaming on the stove top or in a microwave oven and then put into a pre-heated slow cooker to keep hot for serving.

For additional food safety information about meat, poultry, or egg products, call the toll-free USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1 (800) 535-4555; for the hearing-impaired (TTY) 1 (800) 256-7072. The Hotline is staffed by food safety experts weekdays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Eastern time. Food safety recordings can be heard 24 hours a day using a touch-tone phone. Information is also available from the FSIS Web site:
<http://www.fsis.usda.gov>

To determine if a slow cooker will heat food to a safe temperature: Do not fill a cooker less than half full. Do not fill more than two-thirds full. Vegetables cook slower than meat and poultry in a slow cooker. If using vegetables put them in first, at the bottom and around sides of the utensil. Then add meat and cover the food with liquid such as broth, water or barbecue sauce. Keep the lid in place. * Keep raw ingredients refrigerated until they are to be put in the cooker. Use only good quality ingredients. Always defrost meat or poultry before putting it into a slow cooker. Choose to make foods with high moisture content such as chili, soup, and stew or spaghetti sauce.