

Slow Cooker Food Safety

Many consumers prefer the convenience of a slow cooker for preparing soups, stews and other favorites. These countertop appliances cook foods slowly at a low temperature, so vitamins and minerals are retained, less expensive cuts of meat are tenderized and meats shrink less. Best of all, the slow cooker can do all this while you're away from home.

IS A SLOW COOKER SAFE?

Electric slow cookers, properly used, are a great way to reap the benefits of long, slow cooking. The direct, intense heat, combined with the bacteria-killing steam created inside the tightly covered container, make the slow cooker a safe alternative to the risky process of cooking foods for extended periods at a very low temperature in a conventional oven.

SAFE BEGINNINGS

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 (above 40 to 140 °F). 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° when the lid is removed).
4. The temperature of the water should be 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.

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, will not get a "head start" during the first few hours of cooking.

THAW AND CUT UP 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, stew or spaghetti sauce.
- 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 because the food will cook so slowly it could remain in the bacterial danger zone too long.

USE THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF FOOD

1. Fill cooker no less than half full and no more than two-thirds full.
2. Vegetables cook slower than meat and poultry in a slow cooker so if using them, put vegetables in first, at the bottom and around sides of the cooker
3. Then add meat and cover the food with liquid such as broth, water or barbecue sauce.
4. Keep the lid in place, removing only to stir the food or check for doneness.

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 is safe to cook foods on low the entire time, if you are leaving for work, for example, and preparation time is limited. While food is cooking and once it is 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 even if it looks done. 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.

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. However, cooked food can be brought to steaming on the stovetop or in a microwave oven and then put into a preheated slow cooker to keep hot for serving.

SOURCES:

1. Brewer, Susan. *Slow Cooker Safety* (1993). [WWW document] URL <http://www.gopher://cesgopher.af.uiuc.edu:70/...ion/Food-Safety/Slow-Cooker-Safety>.
2. USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service. *FOCUS ON: Slow Cooker Safety*. December 1994.
3. Iowa State University Extension. *Use Slow Cookers Safely*. May 1996.

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