



Food Safety Information



USDA Photo

Slow Cookers and Food Safety

Opening the front door on a cold winter evening and being greeted by the inviting smells of beef stew or chicken noodle soup wafting from a slow cooker can be a diner's dream come true. But winter is not the only time a slow cooker is useful. In the summer, using this small electrical appliance can avoid introducing heat from a hot oven. At any time of year, a slow cooker can make life a little more convenient because by planning ahead, you save time later. And it takes less electricity to use a slow cooker rather than an oven.

Is a slow cooker safe?

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

Vegetables cook slower than meat and poultry in a slow cooker so if using them, put the vegetables in first. Large cuts of meat and poultry may be cooked safely in a slow cooker, however since slow cookers are available in several sizes, consult the instruction booklet for suggested sizes of meat and poultry to cook in your slow cooker.

Then add the meat and desired amount of liquid suggested in the recipe, such as broth, water or barbecue sauce. Keep the lid in place, removing only to stir the food or check for doneness.

REMINDERS:

- Always thaw meat or poultry before putting it into a slow cooker.
- Make sure the cooker is plugged in and turned on.
- 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 — if 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 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. Cooked food should be reheated on the stove, in a microwave, or in a conventional oven until it reaches 165 °F. Then the hot food can be placed in a preheated slow cooker to keep it hot for serving—at least 140 °F as measured with a food thermometer.

Food Safety Questions?

Call the USDA Meat & Poultry Hotline

If you have a question about meat, poultry, or egg products, call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline toll free at

**1-888-MPHotline
(1-888-674-6854).**



The hotline is open Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. ET (English or Spanish).

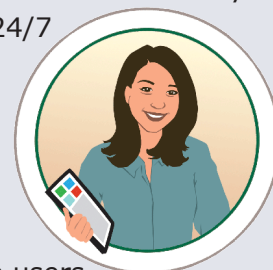
Recorded food safety messages are available 24 hours a day. Check out the FSIS Web site at

www.fsis.usda.gov

Send E-mail questions to **MPHotline.fsis@usda.gov**.

AskKaren.gov

FSIS' automated response system can provide food safety information 24/7 and a live chat during Hotline hours.



Mobile phone users can access **m.askkaren.gov**

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Crockpot and Slow Cooker Food Safety

Important Slow Cooker Food Safety Tips

♦ **Do not lift the lid unnecessarily during the cooking cycle.** Each time the lid is raised, the internal temperature drops 10 - 15 degrees. It takes approximately 20 minutes to recover the lost heat, which extends the required cooking time and increases the food safety risk.

♦ **Allow adequate time to cook food to proper doneness.** If there is any doubt about the degree of doneness, especially when cooking meat in a slow cooker or when cooking at high altitude, use a reliable meat thermometer to ensure that the food has reached the minimum safe temperature of 165° F.



Slow Cooking: Delicious, Convenient and Economical

Slow cookers and 'crockpots' are convenient portable electric appliances that continue to be popular with today's busy cook. The lid is designed to allow condensation to form a seal that aids in the retention of heat. Whether used in the summer to avoid introducing heat from a hot oven into the kitchen, or in the winter for a hearty hot meal, a slow cooker or crockpot can make life a little more convenient.

By planning ahead, you not only save time, but also use less electricity than when using a conventional oven.



Keeping Foods Safe

The direct heat, lengthy cooking time, and steam created within these tightly covered containers combine to prevent foodborne illness. Slow cookers and crockpots should heat food slowly, yet fast enough to keep food out of the *danger zone* --above 40°F and below 140°F. In the danger zone, bacteria grow rapidly and can cause foodborne illness.

- If possible, turn on HIGH for the first hour of cooking and then to the lower setting called for in your recipe. This is highly recommended when cooking meat or poultry. Slow cooking at high altitude can also extend the cooking time *one hour on LOW* for every 4,000 feet. Cooking on HIGH for the first hour helps compensate for the slower cooking that occurs at higher altitudes.
- Fill the cooker no less than half full and no more than two-thirds full. This is to assure safe and even heat distribution and cooking. When cooking meat or poultry, the water or stock level should almost cover the ingredients to create steam and ensure effective heat transfer throughout the slow cooker or crockpot. It can also minimize scorching of the container.



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Crockpot and Slow Cooker Food Safety (cont.)

More Food Safety Tips for Crockpots and Slow Cookers

- **Begin with a clean slow cooker or crockpot, utensils, and work area.** Wash hands well (with warm soapy water for at least 20 seconds) before and during cooking. Place on a dry stable surface with at least 2 inches of space around the cooker. Plug directly into an outlet and avoid using an extension cord.
- **Make sure meat or poultry is completely thawed before putting into a slow cooker or crockpot.** Frozen pieces might not reach 140° F quick enough in a slow cooker, possibly resulting in a foodborne illness. If necessary, meat can be thawed quickly in a microwave oven before being added to the slow cooker or crockpot.
- **If there are leftovers, promptly remove them from the slow cooker or crockpot to cool before refrigerating.** Store leftovers in shallow covered containers and *refrigerate within two hours after cooking has finished.*
- **Do not reheat leftovers in a slow cooker or crockpot.** Heat leftovers in the oven, microwave, or stovetop, until they reach 165°F and then add to the slow cooker, where food should remain hot for serving, 140°F or above, as measured by a calibrated food thermometer.

Have an older slow cooker or crockpot? Make sure it is still operating at safe temperatures:

1. Fill slow cooker or crockpot 1/2 to 2/3 full of tap water.
2. Heat on LOW setting for 8 hours with the lid on.
3. Check the water temperature with an accurate food thermometer, doing so quickly because the temperature drops 10–15 degrees when the lid is raised or removed.
4. The temperature of the water should measure 185°F to 200°F. Temperatures **below 185°F** indicate the crockpot or slow cooker does not heat food adequately to avoid potential food safety problems and should be replaced.

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Resources & References

- ♦ Always read and follow the instructions in the manufacturer's "use and care" book that came with your particular crockpot or slow cooker.
- ♦ A simple online search for 'Extension crockpot recipes' or 'Extension slow cooker recipes' yields great results from Extension offices across the nation for all types of tested recipes--from oatmeal for breakfast, to baked apples for dessert.
- ♦ **USDA Food and Inspection Service 'Slow Cookers and Food Safety'**
http://www.fsis.usda.gov/PDF/SLOW_Cookers_and_Food_Safety.pdf
- ♦ **Utah State University 'Introduction to Slow Cooking'**
<http://extension.usu.edu/Morgan/files/uploads/SLOW%20COOKER%20RECIPES.pdf>

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