

Slow Cookers and Food Safety

Safe Beginnings

Use a clean cooker, clean utensils and a clean work area. Wash hands before and during food preparation. Keep cold foods refrigerated until preparation time. If you cut up meat and vegetables in advance, store them separately in the fridge. Refrigerating foods keeps bacteria from growing.

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 in a slow cooker so if using them, put the vegetables in first. Read the instruction booklet for suggested sizes of meat to cook in your slow cooker. Add the meat and desired amount of liquid suggested in the recipe, such as broth or water. Keep the lid in place, removing only to stir the food or check for doneness.

Settings

Most cookers have two or more settings. Certainly, food will cook faster on high than on low. However, for all-day cooking or 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 preparation time is limited. While food is cooking and once it is done, food will stay safe as long as the cooker is operating. Make sure the slow cooker is turned on and plugged in.

Power Out

If you are not at home during the entire cooking time 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 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 74° C (165°F). Then the hot food can be placed in a preheated slow cooker to keep it hot for serving – at least 60° C (140°F) as measured with a food thermometer.