

For Immediate Release

## **Slow Cookers and Food Safety**

At any time of year, a slow cooker can make life a little more convenient because by planning ahead, you save time later. Opening the front door on a cold winter evening and being greeted by the inviting smells wafting from a slow cooker can be a diner's dream come true.

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 time, and steam created within the tightly covered container combine to destroy bacteria and make the slow cooker a safe process for cooking foods.

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. 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.

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. It's safe to cook foods on low the entire time. While food is cooking and once it's done, food will stay safe as long as the cooker is operating.

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 for up to two hours in the cooker with the power off.

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.

Submitted by Andrea Nisley, UNL Extension Educator, Dawson County

Source: <https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/slow-cookers-and-food-safety>