



Angela Treadaway
Regional Extension Agent
News Release

Safe Slow Cooker Use

A slow cooker can be a great help for the homemaker with a hectic schedule. By planning ahead, time can be saved later during the busier meal preparation time. As long as correct food safety procedure is used, slow cooking can be a good way to cook the tougher, cheaper cuts of meat. Electricity use is substantially lower than with the oven.

For some time, I have had concerns about the safety of cooking in a slow cooker since they use low cooking temperatures from 170° to 280° F. At low temperatures, meat remains in a dangerous temperature zone for a long enough time to encourage bacterial growth that poses a risk for food borne illness. When cooking meat in an oven, it is recommended to never use a temperature of less than 300° F. The Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) of the USDA explains that the slow cooker is safe due to the creation of steam in the tightly sealed, covered cooker along with the lengthy cooking time which combine to destroy the bacteria. FSIS gives some food safety tips that allow the food to be safely cooked at the lower temperatures.

Since it takes the slow cooker longer to reach the bacteria killing temperature, it is essential that the food be handled carefully before the cooking begins. Bacteria multiply very quickly at room temperatures, so the food needs to be as bacteria-free as possible to start with. Hands, work surfaces, utensils and any other surfaces that the foods come into contact with should be as clean as possible. The foods should be kept refrigerated before placing in the cooker and after the food has been cooked. Trying to control the number of bacteria on the food will prevent excessive multiplication of bacteria in the early cooking process.

The slow cooker is safest when used for foods with a high moisture content such as soups, stews, or spaghetti sauce. It is important that the ingredients be safely thawed before placing in the cooker. The food should be in small chunks or pieces to allow it to heat through quickly. Whole chickens or roasts are more likely to remain at an unsafe temperature in the center allowing bacteria to reproduce excessively. In large pieces of meat, the microorganisms may after two hours produce enough toxins to make a person ill even after the food is thoroughly cooked.

Place vegetables to be cooked on the sides and bottom of the cooker since they cook slower than the meat or poultry. Add the meat or poultry next, then cover with liquid. The cooker should be

no less than 1/2 full, or no more than 2/3 full. The lid should remain closed except during stirring and testing for doneness. Although it is safe to start and cook the food on low, it is preferable to start the food on high for the first hour to get the food up to a safe temperature more quickly. The high setting cooks more quickly, but cooking on low allows the tougher cuts of meat to be tenderized and allow all-day cooking. If the food has been properly handled, the food will remain safe as long as the cooker is on.

If there is an interruption in the cooking process, the food should be removed and immediately finished cooking another way. If there is an indication that the power was off when the cooker was unattended, the food should be thrown away. Once the food is thoroughly cooked, it can safely stay in the cooker for two hours even if the power is shut off.

Using a slow cooker can be a safe way to cook while you have to be away from home if the above safety precautions are observed. A slow cooker is not for reheating cold previously cooked food. To use the slow cooker to keep previously cooked foods warm for a buffet, preheat the cooker then put hot food that has been cooked in the microwave or stove into the cooker to be held.

Cheesy White Cauliflower Chili Recipe

Ingredients:

- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 2 onions, finely chopped
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 tablespoon cumin seeds
- 1 tablespoon dried oregano leaves
- 1 tablespoon chili powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon cracked black peppercorns
- 1 can (15 oz size) white kidney beans, drained and rinsed
- 3 cups vegetable stock
- 3 cups cauliflower florets, cooked for 4 minutes in salted boiling water and drained
- 1 jalapeno pepper, minced (more if desired)
- 1 green bell pepper, minced
- 2 cups shredded Monterey jack cheese
- 4 ounces cream cheese, cut into 1/2 inch cubes and softened
- 1 can (4 oz size) chopped mild green chilies
- finely chopped green onions, optional, for garnish
- finely chopped cilantro, optional, for garnish

Directions: In a skillet, heat oil over medium heat. Add onions and cook, stirring, until softened, about 3 minutes. Add garlic, cumin seeds, oregano, chili powder, salt and peppercorns and cook, stirring, for 1 minute. Transfer mixture to slow cooker stoneware. Add beans and stock and stir to combine. Cover and cook on low for 8 to 10 hours or on high for 4 to 5 hours, until hot and

bubbling. Stir in cauliflower, jalapeno pepper, green pepper, Monterey jack cheese, and cream cheese and chilies, if using. Cover and cook on high for 25 to 30 minutes, until the green peppers are softened and cauliflower is heated through. Ladle into bowls and garnish as desired with chopped green onions and cilantro.

If you prefer thicker chili, mash some or all of the beans or puree in a food processor before adding to the recipe.

For more information on food safety and using slow cookers please call Regional Extension Agent, Angela Treadaway, at the St. Clair County Extension office at (205) 338-9416.