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News Release

## **Food Safety Recommendations for Preparing Meals with Slow Cookers**

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Meat and Poultry Hotline encourages Americans to take the necessary steps this winter to ensure proper food safety when preparing meals in a slow cooker.

Home cooks are discovering many sophisticated dishes can be prepared in a slow cooker. While many people long for the inviting smells of classics like beef stew, chicken noodle soup and casseroles, there is a vast collection of slow cooker recipes for everything from regional and ethnic dishes to low-carb and vegetarian dinners. Even wild game recipes tailored for a slow cooker are available.

While slow cooking is a great way to prepare a home-cooked meal and have it ready at the end of a busy working day for your family to enjoy, don't take any food safety shortcuts in the process. The following recommendations are easy to follow and help reduce the threat of foodborne illness from meals cooked at lower temperatures for longer periods of time.

### **Is A Slow Cooker Safe?**

Yes, it cooks foods slowly at a low temperature — generally between 170° and 280° F. The low heat helps less expensive, leaner cuts of meat become tender and shrink less.

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

### **Thaw & Cut Ingredients**

Always defrost meat and 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 a whole chicken because the food will cook so slowly it could remain in the bacterial "Danger Zone" — between 40°F and 140°F — too long.

### **Use the Right Amount of Food**

Fill the slow cooker no less than half full and no more than two-thirds full. 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 appliance. Then add meat and cover the food with liquid such as broth, water or barbecue sauce. 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. It is 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 Outage**

Slow cookers offer the convenience of allowing people to prepare meals while they are away from home. If for some reason the power goes out and you are not home, there is no way to tell if the food got fully cooked so it is best to throw the food away.

If you're home when the power goes out, it is safe to 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.

For more information about this topic or food safety, preservation, or preparation please contact Regional Extension Agent-Angela Treadaway at (205) 338-9416 or (205) 410-3696-cell or email [atreadaw@aces.edu](mailto:atreadaw@aces.edu).

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