

Saving Money on Meals using Slow Cookers

One easy budget-friendly way to save money, time, and energy on food at home is to prepare a hearty meal using a slow cooker.

Not only are slow cookers convenient, but they can also help families save money by making less expensive, tough cuts of meat, such as shoulder, round and chuck steak more tender and shrink less. That is a significant consideration for many, especially when thinking about food prices and how they are increasing.

Research has found that food purchased at grocery stores is projected to increase an additional 1 to 2 percent, and food-away-from-home is projected to increase between 2 and 3 percent this year.

When using a slow cooker, there are some precautions you should take to ensure that the meals you cook are both safe and nutritious to eat. For example, two of the more popular food items to prepare using a slow cooker are meats and poultry, which need to be time and temperature controlled for safety.

According to the USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service, it is important to avoid cooking frozen meats and poultry in a slow cooker. Always thaw them first. This is because frozen beef and poultry will not reach 140 degrees Fahrenheit quick enough, which could cause foodborne illness.

Slow cookers work by cooking foods at lower temperatures, typically between 170 to 280 degrees for several hours. This could be a concern for some foods because bacteria that cause food poisoning multiply quickly in the temperature "danger zone." Between 40 to 140 degrees, according to Foodsafety.gov

Using a food thermometer to accurately determine if your food has reached the proper internal temperature to kill harmful bacteria.

Here are some other tips from the USDA:

- Keep perishable foods especially resliced vegetables, refrigerated and out of the danger zone. Bacteria multiply rapidly when at room temperature. To avoid this, keep your food refrigerated until it is time to add it to the slow cooker.
- Make sure your foods fit. The slow cooker should be half to two-thirds full to ensure your food cooks thoroughly.
- Position foods that take longer to cook on the bottom of the slow cooker, then arrange other solid ingredients on top, making sure to spread them out evenly.
- Keep the lid on. It is important to retain the heat when making a slow cooker meal. Only remove the lid to stir or check for doneness.
- 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.
- Foods take different times to cook depending on the setting used. While foods will cook faster on high than on low, for all-day cooking or for less tender cuts, you may want to use the low setting.
- If you have any leftovers, it is important to store them in a shallow, covered container in the refrigerator within two hours after being cooked. And, when reheating leftovers, do not use your

slow cooker. Use your stove top, microwave, or conventional oven to heat the food to at least 165 degrees before eating it.