

Slow Cooker Safety Tips

Slow cookers are a convenient way to prepare a delicious meal with minimal effort. Just throw all the ingredients in the pot, turn it on, leave for work, come home and dinner is ready. But that is not all you can do with a slow cooker. It is a perfect way for making overnight oatmeal, a dip or my favorite stew. This can be a dream come true for a multitasker, but if you don't follow food safety rules, that dream could be a nightmare.

Here are some tips to ensure that what you slow cook is safe to eat:

- Begin with a clean space. Make sure the cooker, utensils and work area are clean. And don't forget to wash your hands.
- Keep perishable foods refrigerated as long as possible. Bacteria multiply rapidly when at room temperature. To avoid the, keep your food refrigerated until it's time to add it to the pot.
- Prepare meat and vegetables separately. If you prepare your meat and vegetables beforehand, store them separately in your refrigerator to avoid cross-contamination.
- Always defrost meat or poultry before putting it in the slow cooker. Defrosting will ensure your food cooks all the way through to the safe internal temperature. Defrost in the refrigerator, never at room temperature.
- Pay attention to temperature. It is important to make sure your slow cooker reaches a bacteria-killing temperature. Start your slow cooker on the highest setting for the first hour and then switch to low for longer cooking. However, it is still safe to cook foods on low for the entire time, for example, if you are leaving for work, just make sure your foods reach the proper internal temperature that is safe to eat.
- Choose the right setting:
 - Warm: for foods that are already cooked and HOT, should keep foods at 140 degrees F. Should not be used for cooking or reheating COLD foods.
 - Low: Best for all day cooking
 - High: Cooks foods within a few hours.
- Make sure your food fits. The slow cooker should be half to two-thirds full to ensure your food cooks thoroughly. Don't over fill your cooker.
- Cut up your meat. Large chunks of meat may take too long to cook all the way through. Cut meat into smaller pieces before adding it to the slow cooker.
- Keep the lid on. It is important to retain the heat when making a slow cooker meal, so avoid taking off the lid. Only remove the lid to stir or check for doneness.
- Use a food thermometer. The only way to know for sure that your food is safe to eat is with a food thermometer. Use a food thermometer to make sure the food has reached the proper internal temperature. Temperatures should be 145° F for beef, pork, lamb, steaks and roasts; 160° F for ground meats; 165° F for poultry, soups, stews and sauces.
- Store leftovers in shallow containers and refrigerate within two hours. One of the best parts of your slow cooker meal is the leftovers, but make sure you are storing them safely and eat them in a timely manner to reduce your risk of foodborne illnesses.
- If you are not home and the power goes out while your food is in the slow cooker, Throw it Out. If you are home, finish cooking by another method or throw it out. If you are home and the food is done it should be safe to eat for 2 hours.

Beef Stew

Ingredients:

1 pound stew meat
½ cup chopped onions
½ cup carrots
2 cups potato chunks
1 cup water
½ cup catsup
1 teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon pepper
1 can tomato sauce
½ teaspoon sugar

Directions:

Brown stew meat along with onions. In slow cooker add meat along with the other ingredients. Mix well. Cook on HIGH for about 4 hours or on LOW for about 7 to 8 hours.