

## Slow Cooking Basics

Use a slow cooker to warm up this winter with some comfort food! The easy way to make your favorite seasonal meals is to use a slow cooker or the slow cook function of an electric pressure cooker.

Learning to slow cook couldn't be easier, but if you don't know how to utilize a slow cooker properly, you may be left with mushy food and overcooked dishes. Follow these tips on using a slow cooker to its best advantage.

Slow cookers come in many sizes. A large slow cooker with a 6- to 7-quart oblong insert will be the most versatile for most families. This size can accommodate larger roasts or whole chickens and hold main dish recipes serving four or more.

Invest in a programmable slow cooker. Many brands offer slow cookers with this feature so they can be programmed to heat food at a certain temperature for a specified time. When that time has elapsed, the slow cooker keeps the food warm until you can eat and turn it off. The 'Warm' setting is not for cooking! The 'Warm' setting **only** keeps already-cooked food at the perfect serving temperature until mealtime.

Generally, cooking on low (around 190°F) takes about twice as long as cooking on high (about 300°F). Newer slow cookers tend to cook at higher temperatures than older ones. Read the manual for the best cooking success.

Preheating for at least 20 minutes is as important as preheating the oven or skillet. This step is often overlooked in slow cooking.

You'll get the best results by filling the slow cooker between one-half and two-thirds full. If you're cooking with more or less food, cooking times may need adjustment.

Frozen meat should never be added to a slow cooker. It will keep food in the danger zone (40 to 135°F) where bacteria can grow. Frozen vegetables can be added if they are small or chopped, but they may increase the cooking time.

Fattier meats and dark meat chicken are better options for the best results, as leaner cuts may dry out during cooking.

Fish and shellfish don't do well in a slow cooker over long periods. Add fish or shellfish for the short time it requires to cook at the end of cooking.

Brown meat and sauté vegetables before adding them to the slow cooker. You will enjoy an additional depth of deep, caramelized flavor and enhanced appearance.

For even cooking, cut ingredients into evenly sized pieces.

By layering the ingredients in order of cooking time, you can prevent some foods from overcooking while others remain undercooked. The hottest place in the slow cooker is the bottom, so layer the ingredients depending on which ones require more heat to cook and then layer accordingly for the remaining ingredients. Place firm root vegetables like potatoes and carrots at the bottom of the cooker and place the meat on top.

Add delicate vegetables during the last 15 to 60 minutes. Canned beans should be added during the last 30 minutes to keep their shape.

It's best to cook pasta separately and then add it at the end of cooking since it gets sticky in the slow cooker.

Instant rice should be added in the last 30 minutes of cooking. If you want to cook longer, consider using parboiled or converted rice.

Dairy products break down when cooked low and slow for long periods, so you shouldn't add them with the rest of the ingredients. Instead, stir them in during the final 15 minutes of cooking time.

If you want a thicker sauce for your recipe, roll the meat in a little seasoned flour before adding it to the slow cooker. Another option is to stir in a small amount of cornstarch slurry at the end of the cooking cycle.

A slow cooker is a heavy hitter when it comes to cold-weather cooking. No matter if you are a beginner or an experienced cook, these tips on using a slow cooker correctly are the key to creating a satisfying, rich, slow-cooked meal.