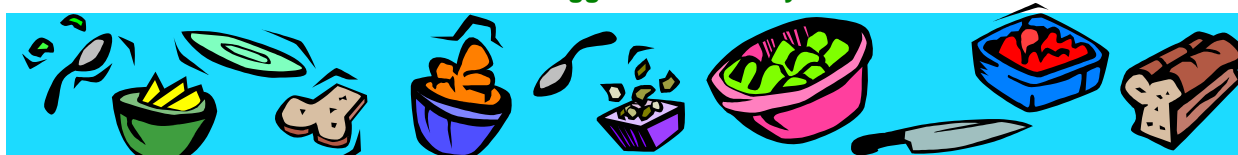


Better Living for Texans

Newsletter for Gregg & Rusk County Families



October 2013

Slow Cookers

Do you have a slow cooker? Most of us call this appliance a Crock-Pot® but that is really one of the brand names that is used for slow cooker. For this issue, the term slow cooker will be used. Slow cookers are great because they do the cooking while you are away. Imagine putting the ingredients in the slow cooker, then going about your day as dinner cooks. Sounds easy? But there are some basic safety rules that need to be followed.

Saving Money

A slow cooker can save money in several ways. It actually takes less electricity to use a slow cooker than an oven. It doesn't heat up your house like an oven. Slow cookers are a great way to prepare inexpensive, lean cuts of meat. The moist heat made by the slow cooker makes these cuts of meat more tender compared to other cooking methods. However, a slow cooker is not limited to meats. Other foods including soups, casseroles, beverages and cereals can be prepared in a slow cooker.

Testing for Accuracy

If you haven't used your slow cooker in a while or if you have a new one, it's a good idea to test it for accuracy. Here's how:

1. Fill the slow cooker with 8 cups of water.
2. Heat on low for 8 hours.
3. Check the water temperature with an accurate food thermometer. Do this quickly since the temperature in the slow cooker drops 10-15 degrees once the lid is removed.
4. The temperature should be at least 185 degrees F. If it is less than this, the slow cooker is not safe to use and should be replaced.

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Source: USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service, www.fsis.gov

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Basic Safety Rules

1. Start clean. Always begin with a clean cooker, clean utensils and a clean work area. Wash hands before and during food preparation, especially after handling raw meat and poultry.
2. Handle ingredients carefully. Keep perishable foods refrigerated until preparation time. It's OK to cut up meat and veggies in advance but keep refrigerated in separate, covered containers in the refrigerator. Because slow cookers can take several hours to reach a temperature hot enough to kill bacteria, constant refrigeration prior to cooking helps to keep bacterial growth to a minimum during the first few hours of cooking.
3. Always defrost meat or poultry before putting it in the slow cooker. Foods that contain a lot of moisture work best: soup, stew, chili, spaghetti sauce, etc.
4. Cut foods into pieces to make sure it cooks thoroughly. Do not try to cook large pieces of meat or a whole chicken since the food will cook so slowly that it might remain in the danger zone for bacterial growth too long.
5. Use the right amount of food for your slow cooker. It should be filled between one-half and two-thirds full. Since veggies cook slower than meat and poultry, they should be placed on the bottom, then meat and cover the food with liquid such as broth, water or sauce. Keeps the lid on, removing only to stir the food or check for doneness.
6. Pick the right setting. Slow cookers usually have two or more settings. The low setting is recommended for all day cooking or for preparing the less tender cuts of meat. If possible, let the slow cooker cook on "high" for the first hour then switch to the low setting. If this is not possible, it's still safe to cook food on low for the entire time.
7. Don't peek! Every time you remove the lid, it can take up to 20 minutes to make up for the lost heat.
8. If you are not home during the entire slow-cooking time and the electrical power goes out, throw out the food, even if it looks done. You can often tell if the power has gone out because many appliances such as alarm clocks, microwaves and VCRs will have the time flashing. If you are home when the power goes off, finish cooking the dish immediately by some other method such as a gas stove. If this isn't possible, throw food out.
9. Test for doneness. Use a food thermometer to make sure that meat and poultry dishes have reached a safe internal temperature. For poultry 170 degrees for breast and 180 degrees for thigh; ground meat 160 degrees; roasts 145 degrees for medium rare, 160 degrees for medium and 170 degrees for well; casseroles and soups 165 degrees.
10. Handle leftovers carefully. Make sure that leftovers are stored in shallow, covered containers and refrigerated within two hours after cooking is finished. Use a stove top or microwave for reheating leftovers. It is not recommended to use a slow cooker to reheat leftovers.

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Tips for Successful Slow Cooking

- *Spray the inside of the slow cooker with cooking spray for easy cleaning.
- *Processed cheese seems to work better than Cheddar cheese.
- *Root veggies (potatoes, carrots, onions) take longer to cook than other vegetables. Cut these in small pieces and place in the bottom of the slow cooker.
- *When time permits, brown pieces of meat before placing in the slow cooker. This adds extra flavor and allows excess fat to be removed.
- *Cook and drain ground meat before adding to the slow cooker.
- *When placing pieces of meat in the slow cooker, be sure there is space between the meat so the heat can circulate around the pieces.
- *Add crushed or ground seasonings near the end of cooking since they may become too mild during a long cooking time. Whole seasonings do fine during long cooking times but their flavor may increase so start out using about half the amount.

Refrigerator Stew (Makes about 5 cups)

What you need:

- * 1 pound stew meat or ground meat
- * 1 envelope onion soup mix
- * 1 can (14.5 ounce) cream of mushroom soup
- * 1 ½ cups water
- * 1 onion, cut into bite-sized pieces
- * 4-6 carrots cut into bite-sized pieces
- * 4-5 potatoes cut into bite-sized pieces
- * 1 can (14.5 ounce) green beans
- * 1 can (14.5 ounce) corn

How to make it:

1. Wash hands and make sure that slow cooker, cooking utensils and counter tops are clean.
2. If using stew meat, cut into bite-sized pieces.
3. If using ground meat, brown and drain.
4. Place all ingredients in the slow cooker.
5. Cook on high for 4 hours or on low for 8 hours.
5. Freezes Well!

- Nutritional Information: (per serving): Calories – 375; Total Fat: 15.1 g; Cholesterol: 141.2 mg; Sodium: 1,254.2 mg; Total Carbohydrates: 23 g; Dietary Fiber: 1.3 g; Protein: 48.0 g



Trick or Treat? Make Sure Your family only receives treats this season by following these few food safety precautions:

- *Have adult check all candy and food before eating
- *Throw away any foods that have spoiled or call the police if food has been tampered with
- *Only give out store bought foods, no homemade foods!
- *Do not eat any homemade foods you have received, unless from people you know!
- *Leave your light on so all children are safe and can see

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