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Living Well

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Slow Cooker Safety Tips

After a busy day at work or school, being greeted by the smells of beef stew, chili, or chicken noodle soup cooking in the kitchen can be a diner's dream come true. With careful planning, a slow cooker can make life a little easier any time of the year.

Slow cookers use a low temperature to cook food slowly. They generally operate at 170 to 280 degrees Fahrenheit. This might seem too low to be safe, but in fact, the slow cooker's direct heat on the food, long cooking time, and the steam produced inside a tightly-covered container, makes the process safe. The combination kills harmful bacteria that can cause illness. As you use your slow cooker, consider the following tips:

***Begin safe, stay safe.** Begin with a clean slow cooker, clean utensils, and a clean work area. Wash hands before and during food preparation.

***Keep perishable foods refrigerated until preparation time.** If you cut up meat and vegetables in advance, store them separately in the refrigerator. The slow cooker may take several hours to reach a safe, bacteria-killing temperature. Constant refrigeration assures that bacteria, which multiply at room temperature, will not get a "head start" during the first few hours of cooking.

***Always thaw meat or poultry before putting into a slow cooker.** When using commercially frozen slow cooker meals, prepare according to manufacturer's instructions.

***Use the right amount of food.** Vegetables cook slower than meat and poultry in a slow cooker so if using them, put the vegetables in first. Then add the meat and desired amount of liquid suggested in the recipe, such as broth, water, or barbecue sauce. Keep the lid in place, removing only to stir the food or check for doneness. Large cuts of meat and poultry may be cooked safely in a slow cooker, however since slow cookers are available in several sizes, consult the instruction booklet for suggested sizes of meat and poultry to cook in your slow cooker.

***Consider the settings when using your slow cooker.** Foods take different times to cook depending upon the setting used. 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 is safe to cook foods on low the entire time – if you are leaving for work, for example, and preparation time is limited.

***Store leftovers properly.** Store leftovers in a shallow covered containers and refrigerate within two hours after cooking is finished. Reheating leftovers in a slow cooker is not recommended. Cooked food should be reheated on the stove, in a microwave, or in a conventional oven until it reaches 165 degrees Fahrenheit. Then the hot food can be placed in a preheated slow cooker to keep it hot for serving – at least 140 degrees Fahrenheit as measured with a food thermometer.

***Be safe in the event of a power outage.** If you are not at home during the entire slow-cooking process and the power goes out, throw away the food even if it looks done. If you are at home, 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 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.

For more information, contact the Flint Hills Extension District office in Cottonwood Falls at (620) 273-6491 or the office in Council Grove at (620) 767-5136.

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