

## Slow Cooker Basics



Slow cookers are handy kitchen tools that use steam instead of oil or butter to cook food. This low-fat cooking method keeps calories in check.

You can also save money with a slow cooker. Use one to easily turn inexpensive cuts of tough meat into a delicious meal. Keep reading for tips on how to use a slow cooker.

### Step 1: Learn How Your Slow Cooker Works

Slow cookers vary from model to model. Some are set at higher temperatures than others. The rate at which liquids evaporate also varies. Take time to read the instructions and learn about your slow cooker.

- **Understand the settings:** Cook tender cuts of meat on high. Tougher cuts of meat need to be cooked longer, so set the slow cooker to low.
- **Explore your slow cooker's features:** Check for options like warming and automatic shut-off, and learn how they work.
- **Fill it up:** For a successful meal, fill the slow cooker to half to three-quarters of its capacity.
- **Leave the lid on:** When food is cooking, do not lift the lid often. Steam is used for cooking. Lifting the lid allows the steam to escape, which slows the cooking process. Lifting the lid frequently also allows the cooking temperature to fall. That may allow harmful bacteria to grow.

#### Which Foods Cook Well in a Slow Cooker?

For tasty slow-cooker meals, try recipes using these ingredients:

- Pork roast or loin
- Fish
- Chicken (whole or cut into pieces)
- Beef roast, brisket, or stew meat
- Lean ground beef
- Beans
- Vegetables that won't get mushy (like potatoes, onions, mushrooms, celery, carrots, and canned tomatoes)

## Step 2: Schedule Your Meal Preparation

The cooking time for slow cooker recipes can range from 2 to 10 hours. You do not need to be present while the slow cooker is cooking.

Before you leave home in the morning, prepare the ingredients and place them in the slow cooker. When you return at the end of the day, a delicious meal will be waiting!

## Step 3: Build Flavor

Try these ideas for the best-tasting meals:

- **Brown meat first:** If you use ground meat, always brown it and drain off the fat before adding the meat to the slow cooker. You don't have to brown other types of meat, but taking this extra step will add delicious flavor to the finished meal.
- **Use a limited amount of liquid:** Because slow cookers use "trapped" steam to cook food, you do not need to add a lot of liquid. When you use a recipe that was not created for a slow cooker, cut the amount liquid in half. If a sauce or stew or other slow-cooked dish seems too thick, you can always add more liquid.
- **Experiment with ingredients:** Try a variety of flavorful liquids to cook your food. Among the possibilities are stocks, broths, low-fat gravy, low-fat cream soups, and even salsa. You can also add flavor with spices and herbs. Whole spices have powerful flavors, so limit the amount you use. To preserve the flavor of fresh herbs, like dill or parsley, add them toward the end of the cooking process.

