

Why Slow Cookers Are Here to Stay¹

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Figure 1. Image of a slow cooker.

Credit: Canva.com

What is a slow cooker?

A slow cooker is a self-contained, countertop electrical appliance. It consists of a cooking pot made from ceramic, porcelain, or even metal that is surrounded by an electrical unit containing a heating element. The heating element can be on all sides of the pot, or just on the bottom. All slow cookers have a lid made from glass, metal, or ceramic that is designed to create a low-pressure seal to stop moisture from escaping the pot. When unplugged, a slow cooker becomes portable, allowing you to easily transport the meal you've cooked.

How does a slow cooker work?

Electrical coils in the heating element indirectly transfer heat from the outer unit or bottom to the pot. The pot, or crock, is then warmed to temperatures between 180°F–300°F. The way the heat is transferred allows the ingredients in the pot to simmer at low temperatures for several hours until the ingredients are cooked. While the food cooks, it releases steam that is then trapped in the pot by the lid. The steam condenses to moisture, which is essential to the slow-cooking process.

What is the difference between a slow cooker and a Crockpot™?

A Crockpot™ is a brand of slow cooker, but a slow cooker is not always a Crockpot™. Crockpot™ was the original brand of slow cooker and has become the generic words for a slow cooker today. Crockpots™ have a “crock” made of porcelain or ceramic that sits inside the heating element. Slow cookers can mimic this same design, or they can have a metal pot that sits on top of the heating source. Because the pot is heated from the bottom, the food often requires stirring and therefore longer cook times with this type of design.

Benefits of a Slow Cooker

Even though it may take all day to cook something, a slow cooker uses less power than an oven and doesn't heat up your entire kitchen when in use. Slow cookers make tough cuts of meat become tender due to the condensation that builds up in the pot, which acts like a baster by tenderizing the meat during the long, slow simmering process. Slow cookers do not need to be attended to the entire time they are in use, which allows you to cook overnight or when not at home if proper safety guidelines are followed.



Figure 2. Image of a slow cooker with stew.

Credit: Canva.com

What can you cook in a slow cooker?

Slow cookers are great for cooking fatty and tougher cuts of meat. Chuck roasts, pork shoulders, lamb shanks, short ribs and beef briskets come out juicy and tender. Soups and stews are good slow-cooker meals, becoming more flavorful during the long simmering process. There are even recipes available online for making pot pies, chicken and dumplings, meatballs, lasagna, cheese dips, brownies, French toast, and breakfast casseroles.

Cleaning the Slow Cooker

Turn off and unplug your slow cooker, allowing it to cool before cleaning. Most slow-cooker lids and inner pots can be washed with hot, soapy water or placed in the dishwasher. Wait until the inner pot is cooled before immersing it in cold water. Use only nonabrasive cleaners and soft sponges, cloths, or rubber spatulas to remove any particles stuck to the inner pot. Never put the base or the heating elements in water or in any other liquid. Use a damp cloth or sponge to wipe down the exterior of the slow cooker after every use.



Figure 3. Image of a slow cooker with corned beef and carrots. Credit: Canva.com

Slow Cooker Safety

Before use, read the manual that comes with your slow cooker for information that is specific to your appliance. The slow cooker should be used on a flat surface that is clear of hazards. Make sure the appliance is plugged in properly. Slow cookers need water or liquid to create the steam required to cook and simmer, so add enough to meet the manufacturer's requirements for safe and effective cooking. Note that anytime the lid is removed during the cooking process, the internal temperature can drop 10–15 degrees, which will require you to add

additional simmering time. If possible, preheat the slow cooker and add hot liquids to ensure a rapid heat start.

Food Safety and Slow Cookers

Make sure cooking utensils are clean before using. Wash hands before and during food preparation. Keep ingredients in the refrigerator until ready to use because the slow cooker may take several hours to reach a temperature that will kill bacteria. Any meats and vegetables cut in advance should be stored separately in the refrigerator. Fresh vegetables will take longer to cook, so they need to be placed in the bottom of the pot, closest to the heating element. If the power goes out during use and it is not possible to finish cooking right away by another method, it is safest to throw it all away.

More Tips for Using Slow Cookers

Never put frozen meat or poultry in a slow cooker. Thaw food completely before cooking so the ingredients can quickly reach safe cooking temperatures. Do not use the “warm” setting to cook food. Never use a slow cooker to reheat food or leftovers. Always soak beans for 12 hours, rinse and then boil on the stove top for at least 10 minutes before adding the beans to a slow cooker. Use a thermometer to verify that all foods are cooked to the minimum internal temperature as recommended by the USDA: <https://www.foodsafety.gov/food-safety-charts/safe-minimum-cooking-temperature>.

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