

Slow Cooking Top Tips

Slow cooking is easy, time-saving, nutritious and cheap. There are many dishes, both sweet and savoury, which can be made using a slow cooker.

Slow cookers use electricity and are great for cooking stews, soups, casseroles and other dishes that require long, slow, moist cooking. This is a wonderful way to cook cheaper cuts of meat as it helps to tenderise them.

Slow cooking also preserves nutrients that are sometimes lost when cooking via other methods. A slow cooker uses less electricity than an oven, therefore is a cheaper method to cooking.

When cooking with a slow cooker remember to:

- practice good food hygiene
- Check ingredients are in date
- Store food correctly
- Supervise young children when in the kitchen cooking
- Prepare ingredients in advance
- set the slow cooker on the correct temperature setting

Batch Cooking:

Batch cooking is a great way to stock the freezer with healthy meals that are portion controlled. It's also a cheaper way of buying and storing food compared to buying prepared ready meals which are often expensive, and high in saturated fat, sugar and salt.

Batch cooking allows you to plan ahead e.g., you can take out a meal each morning from the freezer to defrost then heat accordingly. Family lives are busy and it's too easy to reach for convenience food if meals are not planned and prepared.

Allow time to buy, prepare and cook the meals you want to batch cook and make sure to have enough containers and freezer space to store your food in.

Batch cooking can be a fun and an engaging part of family life. Get the kids involved in helping chop vegetables!

Check out our Smoked Paprika Sausage Hotpot recipe resource for a savoury option that is perfect in the slow cooker.



In addition to the above, cooking in batches is kinder to the environment as there is less packaging. Try buying fresh produce from local suppliers or markets to get low-cost fruit and veg.

Batch cooking can also help you stay in control if you are watching your weight or keeping to a healthy balanced diet.

Freezing portions:

Avoid single-use plastics and invest in some good-quality airtight containers, which will withstand repeated freezing, for batch cooking. Small ovenproof dishes are ideal for freezing dishes such as lasagne and fish pie.

If you cook more than you need, most slow cooker recipes are suitable for freezing. Make sure you cool the food down as quickly as possible, place it in a labelled freezer bag and keep it in the freezer. Most food will last for 1-3 months. Make sure you write on the bag what is inside it and when you made and froze it. Food should be defrosted fully overnight in the fridge and heated through until it is piping hot all the way through before eating.

To ensure food stays safe, cool cooked dishes quickly before freezing. Freezing hot dishes will increase the temperature of the freezer and may cause other foods to start defrosting.

Slow cooker temperature settings:

Many slow cookers have two or more temperature settings. These settings can vary from one cooker to the next, so it is very important to read the manufacturer's instructions carefully. Most modern cookers have a 'Low' and a 'High' setting. Some will have an 'Auto' option, which means it starts cooking at High, then switches automatically to Low. If a cooker has a 'Keep Warm' setting, it means that after the food is cooked it will hold the food at a safe temperature until serving time.

Liquid Content:

Use about half the recommended amount as you would in a conventional recipe, unless otherwise stated. One cup of liquid for a casserole-style dish is generally more than ample.



If you find that the dish has too much liquid for your liking, simply turn the setting to High during the last hour of cooking. If you find you have too much liquid, either take off the cooker lid [when on high setting] or take out some of the excess liquid and heat on the stove in a saucepan until the volume reduces and the flavours are concentrated, before returning to the slow cooker.

Meat:

Cheaper cuts of meat, such as casserole steaks, are a good choice for the slow cooker, as they break down to become very tender. Some people brown meat before adding it to the cooker. Generally, this is not necessary, not even for roasts, but you may prefer the improved colour you get when browning the meat first. All visible fat and gristle should be cut off meat for the slow cooker. Meat should be thawed before placing in the cooker.

Roasting meats is simple – just place them straight into the slow cooker. No liquid is necessary – the gravy develops during the cooking process. Herbs and spices can be used to season the meat if desired.



Vegetables:

In the slow cooker, some vegetables tend to take longer to cook than meat. Generally speaking, root vegetables, such as carrots, parsnips and onions, should be cut into pieces no larger than 2cm. Soft vegetables, such as tomatoes and courgettes, should be added in the last hour of cooking, unless you want them to break down. Frozen vegetables should be thawed and added during the last half-hour. Green vegetables, such as peas and beans, lose their characteristic bright colour if slow cooked for too long.

Dairy Products:

Dairy products do not handle long periods of slow cooking particularly well. Generally, they should be added during the last hour to half-hour of cooking. Low-fat cream or evaporated milk can be used instead of regular cream, and sometimes they perform better than the full-fat varieties.

Monday 30th October - Friday 24th November

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