

Slow cooker tips for busy days

A slow cooker can be a handy kitchen tool. It can help you get dinner on the table on busy nights. They don't take a lot of prep time or expert cooking skills to use. Plus, they are less expensive than other cooking devices.

HERE'S HOW TO USE A SLOW COOKER TO YOUR ADVANTAGE:

- 1. Set it up the night before.** Add all your ingredients to the insert in the evening and put it in the refrigerator. The next morning, put the insert in the cooker, turn it on, and go! If it doesn't have a removable insert, simply put the ingredients into a big bowl instead. Then transfer it into the cooker in the morning.
- 2. Check the temperature.** Before serving any food, use a food thermometer to be sure it's fully cooked.
- 3. Hands off.** Don't open a slow cooker lid during cooking. This releases a lot of heat, which can interfere with proper cooking.
- 4. Thaw meat in the fridge first.** The low, slow cooking process may not get the meat hot enough for safety. Always thaw meats first by putting them in the refrigerator 24 to 48 hours before you cook them.
- 5. Layers matter.** Tough, dense vegetables and starches like potatoes and winter squash can go on the very bottom of the cooker. They won't get too soft or mushy. However, softer vegetables like spinach, broccoli and peas should **not** go on the bottom.
- 6. Add quick finishes.** When it's time for dinner, add some fresh herbs or flavors like lemon juice. Throw together a quick side dish, like microwaving some frozen vegetables. Or, cut up a fruit salad the night before and have it ready to go!
- 7. Use cheaper meats.** You can buy tougher cuts of meat, which cost less. Then slow cook them for several hours and you'll get tender results.

