



Safely Using Your Slow Cooker or Nesco Roaster

Opening the front door on a cold winter evening and being greeted by the inviting smells of beef stew or chicken noodle soup wafting from a slow cooker can be a diner's dream come true. But winter is not the only time a slow cooker is useful. In the summer, using this small appliance can avoid introducing heat from a hot oven. At any time of year, a slow cooker can make life a little more convenient because by planning ahead, you save time later. And it takes less electricity to use a slow cooker rather than an oven.

Nesco roasters are a kitchen favorite for those needing to feed a crowd: whether it's a church supper or a family reunion. These roasters allow you to cook larger quantities of food, but with little fuss and minimal electricity.

Are Slow Cookers and Nesco Roasters Safe?

Yes, if used properly either countertop appliance cooks foods to a safe internal temperature. Both slow cookers and roasters cook foods slowly at a low temperature—generally between 170° and 280° F. The low heat helps less expensive, leaner cuts of meat become tender and shrink less. The direct heat from the pot, lengthy cooking time, and steam created within the tightly-covered container combine to destroy bacteria and make the slow cooker or roaster a safe process for cooking foods.

Safe Beginnings

Begin with a clean appliance, 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. A slow cooker or roaster may take several hours to reach a safe, bacteria-killing temperature. Constant refrigeration assures that bacteria, which multiply rapidly at room temperature, won't get a "head start" during the first few hours of cooking.

Thaw Ingredients

Always defrost meat or poultry before putting it into a slow cooker or roaster; this is especially important with larger cuts of meats which may take several hours to reach the cooking temperature. Defrost frozen vegetables and make sure that any broth that you will be adding to the appliance is completely thawed. If using a commercially frozen slow cooker meal, prepare according to manufacturer's instructions.



Use the Right Amount of Food

Follow the manufacturer's instructions; most manufacturers recommend that you fill the cooker or roaster no less than half full and no more than two-thirds full. Don't be fooled by marketing images that show the roaster or cooker over-flowing with food. Filling a cooker or roaster too full can be unsafe. Vegetables cook slower than meat and poultry in a slow cooker so if using them, put vegetables in first, at the bottom and around sides of the utensil. Then add meat and cover the food with liquid such as broth, water or barbecue sauce. Keep the lid in place, removing only to stir the food or check for doneness. It's very important not to fill the appliance so full that the lid fails to fit tightly. Most slow cookers can accommodate a 2 to 4 pound roast or chicken and the lid will still seal tightly. Roasters can accommodate larger cuts of meat or even a small turkey. Check the manufacturer's instructions for details. Sealing the moist air inside the cooker or roaster helps to destroy any harmful bacteria, allows food to cook more quickly and evenly, and helps to tenderize tough cuts of meat.

Settings

Some cookers and roaster have two or more settings. Foods take different times to cook depending upon the setting used. Certainly, foods will cook faster on high than on low. However, for all-day cooking or for less-tender cuts, you may want to use the low setting. 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's safe to cook foods on low the entire time -- if you're leaving for work, for example, and preparation time is limited. While food is cooking and once it's done, food will stay safe as long as the cooker is operating.

Slow Cooker Treasures

Everyone knows that slow cookers (and roasters) are great for pot roast and soups. Here are some 'surprise' foods that cook up easily in a slow cooker:

- Baked potatoes. Scrub 4 to 10 Idaho or russet baking potatoes under running water and dry. Prick each potato a few times with a fork and rub with butter or oil (if desired). Pile into slow cooker. Cover and cook on high 3 to 5 hours, or low 6 to 9 hours, until fork-tender. These potatoes are excellent mashed, served as baked potatoes, or chilled and fried the next morning as breakfast potatoes.
- Low-fat macaroni and cheese. Spray the inside of your crock pot with nonstick spray. Combine 8 ounces cooked and drained macaroni pasta, 16 ounces shredded sharp Cheddar cheese (low-fat OK), 1-1/2 cups skim milk, 1 can evaporated fat-free milk, and 2 eggs. Mix in crock pot, cover and cook on low 3-1/2 to 4 hours, until the edges are brown and the temperature reaches 165°F. Do not stir and do not lift the lid until the end of the cooking time is near. This casserole is best prepared with pre-cooked pasta.

- Moist and flavorful ‘stewed’ chicken. Place a 3 pound chicken in a slow cooker. Sprinkle with salt and pepper or other seasoning, if desired. Do not add liquid. Cover and cook on high for 3 to 4 hours, until the meat falls from the bone. Pull the meat from the bones and chill in a shallow container; use for chicken salad or your favorite casserole. Strain the fat from the liquid that collects in the cooker and use as stock for soup.
- Slow cooker corn on the cob. [This recipe requires fresh ears of corn still in the husk; use the freshest corn possible.] Carefully pull back the husk from each ear, but leave it attached at the stem end. Remove the silk from each ear and rinse the ear under cold running water. Rewrap the corn in the husk and tie the top with kitchen twine or a strip of husk. Trim the stem flat so the ears stand upright in the cooker – do not stack horizontally. Arrange the ears with the stem down, packed together so they are standing. Add ½ cup water for a medium cooker, ¾ cup for a large one. Cover and cook on high until the corn is very tender, 1 to 2 hours, depending on the age of the corn. Check doneness by peaking at one ear.

Handling Leftovers

Store leftovers in shallow containers, **no more than 3 inches deep**, and refrigerate within two hours after cooking is finished. **Do not reheat leftovers in a slow cooker or roaster.** However, cooked food can be brought to steaming or boiling on the stove top and then put into a **preheated** cooker or roaster to keep hot for serving. Slow cookers or roasters are excellent ways to keep food hot on a buffet line.

Other Ways to Use a Slow Cooker or Roaster

- Try using your slow cooker to stew up tomatoes for freezing or for making delicious, flavorful fruit butters.
- Stew up raw chicken bones with vegetables and a minimal amount of water for flavorful stock.
- You can even use your roaster during canning season to keep canning jars warm. Here’s how: place washed, rinsed canning jars in a roaster. Add water to fill the bottom of the roaster two to four inches. Place the lid on the roaster, turn the heat on high, and allow the jars to steam until heated through. You can pre-sterilize pint jars for jams and jellies by boiling jars in a covered roaster for 10 minutes.

USDA information on slow cookers is here www.fsis.usda.gov/PDF/Slow_Cookers_and_Food_Safety.pdf and in Spanish www.fsis.usda.gov/PDF/Spanish_Slow_Cookers.pdf

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