

January: National Slow Cooking Month

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Americans' busy lifestyles often show up in their cooking and eating habits. Over 30 percent of calories are consumed away from home, with more than 40 percent of food dollars spent on food away from home, which is typically higher in calories and fat and lower in calcium, fiber, and iron. Planning



meals ahead can improve health while saving time and money. When families eat together, meals are likely to be more nutritious. Family meals also provide a great

time for children and parents to reconnect. January is National Slow Cooking Month and one way to increase meals at home is to use a slow cooker. Check out the following information on slow cooker benefits, food safety, and recipe ideas.

Benefits, food safety, and recipe ideas:

Slow cooker benefits. They use less electricity than an oven and can be used year-round. Because of the long, low-temperature cooking, slow cookers help tenderize less-expensive cuts of meat. They usually



allow for one-step preparation; putting all the ingredients in the slow cooker saves time and reduces cleanup. A variety of foods can be cooked in a slow

cooker, including soups, stews, side dishes, main dishes, meats, poultry, and desserts.

Know your slow cooker. Most slow cookers have two or three settings. Food typically cooks in six to 10 hours on the low setting and four to six hours on the high setting. If possible, turn the slow cooker on the high setting for the first hour of cooking time and then use the setting that fits your needs. Read your slow cooker instruction manual and follow manufacturers' directions. Slow cookers are available in different sizes, so instructions will vary.



Slow cookers and food safety. Begin with a clean cooker, utensils and work area. Keep perishable foods refrigerated until preparation time. Store cut-



up meat and vegetables separately in the fridge. Always thaw meat or poultry before putting it into a slow cooker. Vegetables cook slower than meat and poultry, so if using them, put vegetables in first. Then add meat and liquid suggested in the recipe, such as broth, water or sauce. Keep the lid in place, removing only to stir the food or check for doneness.

Safely handle leftovers. Do not store leftovers in a deep container, such as the slow cooker. Store leftovers in shallow covered containers and



refrigerate within two hours after cooking is completed. Reheating leftovers in a slow cooker is not recommended. Cooked food should be reheated on the stove, in a microwave, or in a conventional oven until it reaches 165 degrees Fahrenheit (F). Then the hot food can be placed in a preheated slow cooker to keep it hot for serving, at least 140 degrees F as measured with a food thermometer.

Recipe conversions. Most recipes can be converted. Because liquids do not boil away in a slow cooker, you can usually reduce liquids by one-third to one-half. This reduction in liquid does not apply to soups. Pasta may become mushy if added too early, so it could be added at the end of the cooking process or cooked separately and added just before serving. Milk, cheese and cream may be added one hour before serving.

For more resources and tips on slow cooker meals, check out <http://go.unl.edu/dm9k>. For more food, nutrition and health information from Nebraska Extension go to www.food.unl.edu.

Recipe Ideas for Slow Cookers!

Cheesy Spinach-Artichoke Dip (21 servings):

- **Ingredients:** 1 (14 oz.) can artichoke hearts, chopped and drained, 1 (10 oz.) pkg. frozen spinach, thawed, 1 (8 oz.) pkg. cream cheese, low-fat, softened, 1 (8 oz.) carton sour cream, low-fat, ¾ c. grated Parmesan cheese, ¾ c. low-fat milk, ½ c. onion, chopped, ½ c. mayonnaise low-fat, 1 T. white vinegar, ¼ tsp. black pepper, and ½ tsp. garlic powder (optional).
- **Directions:** Place ingredients in a 3½ quart slow cooker. Mix well. Cover slow cooker with lid, and cook on low for 1 hour. Stir occasionally. Serve warm with bread or tortilla chips.
- **Source:** <http://go.unl.edu/aaqy>

Chicken Curry (Makes 10 servings):

- **Ingredients:** 2¾ lb. chicken breasts, without skin, 1 (16-oz.) jar salsa (mild or medium), 1 medium onion, chopped, 2 Tbsp. curry powder, and 1 c. fat-free sour cream.
- **Directions:** Place chicken in slow cooker. Combine salsa, onions and curry powder and pour over chicken. Cover with lid. Cook on low for 8 to 10 hours (or high for 5 hours). Remove chicken to serving platter; cover and keep warm. Add sour cream to salsa mixture in the slow cooker. Blend and pour over the chicken.
- **Source:** <http://www.ag.ndsu.edu/pubs/yf/foods/fn1511.pdf>

Additional Resources & Links:

Slow Cooker Hamburger Stew. This slow-cooker stew is such a comfort food. You probably have all or most of the ingredients in your kitchen. It is a comfort, also, to know you are providing a nourishing meal for your family.

<http://food.unl.edu/fnh/slow-cooker-hamburger-stew>

A Healthier Recipe for Beef Roast. Living a busy life? Turn to your slow cooker to make simple recipes. After prepping all of your ingredients, place them in your slow cooker and let it sit for 6 to 10 hours depending on the recipe. How easy is that! <http://makinghealthierdecisions.com/2013/01/27/a-healthier-recipe-for-beef-roast/>

UNL Extension Calendar. National Food Days, Weeks, and Months for January. <http://food.unl.edu/web/fnh/january>

Sources:

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2. Food Safety and Inspection Service. (2013). Slow Cookers and Food Safety. United States Department of Agriculture. Accessed at: http://www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/portal/fsis/topics/food-safety-education/get-answers/food-safety-fact-sheets/appliances-and-thermometers/slow-cookers-and-food-safety/ct_index.
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4. Garden-Robinson, J., Otto, K. (2013). Now Serving: Slow Cooker Meals Handout. North Dakota State University Extension Service Accessed at: <http://www.ag.ndsu.edu/pubs/yf/foods/fn1511.pdf>.

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