

PENNY SAVER NEWS

FAX: 932-5261

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BY: Mary A. Keith, Ph.D., L.D.
Food, Nutrition and Health Agent**HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY**

5339 S. County Road 579

Seffner, FL 33584-3334

PH:(813)744-5519 x 136, FAX:744-5776
e-mail:mkeith@ufl.edu**Safe and Slow**

Usually the recommendations for safe food handling do not include 'slow'. Most of the time the ideal treatment is to get food hot enough or cold enough to keep it safe as quickly as possible. That's because bacteria like to live in a nice, comfortable temperature, not too hot and not too cold. So taking our time getting food up or down the thermometer gives them plenty of time to grow. This is why a lot of people never get around to learning the joys of using a slow cooker or CrockPot®. But used correctly, slow cookers can be perfectly safe.

And used well, they're a delight to use. Instead of having to rush around to get dinner on the table when you get home from work, wouldn't it be nice to step in the door to an aroma of hot beef stew, or slow simmered spaghetti sauce, or even chicken and rice? It is wonderful! No rush, except to put the plates on the table and dig in.

Some of the early models of slow cookers might not have been as safe as possible. But today's cookers do get food hot enough, fast enough to be safe. They cook the food between 170°F and 280°F, which is plenty hot to kill any lurking bacteria. At the same time, those temperatures are low enough to tenderize the tougher and usually less expensive cuts of meat. They do a great job of cooking dry beans, another inexpensive and highly nutritious source of protein, fiber and nutrients.

So, if you're not a slow cooker yet, and even if you do use it, here are some important safety tips. First, be sure that all foods, especially meats, are completely

thawed before you put them in a slow cooker. The cooker might not get the food hot enough fast enough if it has to thaw it out first.

At the same time, be sure that all perishable foods are kept refrigerated until they go into the cooker. It's fine to peel and cube potatoes, dice carrots and onions, even brown ground beef the night before. But keep it all refrigerated until it goes into the pot. If you do prepare the ingredients in advance, keep them separate. It's okay to combine the chopped potatoes, carrots and onions in one bag. But keep the meat separate in the refrigerator. Combining them in advance is just too likely to let bacteria grow.

If you'll be in the house the first hour, start the cooker on high. Then after 1 hour turn it down to low if that's what the recipe calls for. The extra burst of heat at the beginning is a little added safety. Don't over-fill your cooker. At most it should be 2/3 full when you put the lid in place. Too full to start can take too long to heat into the middle. And it can mean a puddle of cooking liquid around the cooker and on the floor when you get home. That's no fun!

Because veggies take longer to cook than meats do put them in first. Let a layer of savory vegetables be the rack that holds the meat. It'll taste great when it comes out. Try to arrange the meat so that there's room between the pieces if possible. Put the seasonings over the meat, then add the amount of liquid the recipe calls for. If you're inventing your combination, remember that slow cookers hold their moisture. You won't need nearly as much liquid as when you cook on the stove top. The liquid can be broth, barbeque sauce, tomato or vegetable juice, water, or even part wine or fruit juice.

One last tip, for best cooking, best safety and best flavor – don't peek! Keep the lid on as much as possible. Every time you open it heat and moisture escape. So only

open it if the dish needs to be stirred, or when you're ready to check to see if it's done.

Here's an easy dinner that you can add as much or as little hot sauce to as you like to keep the family happy. Serve over brown rice, with salad or steamed broccoli on the side, dinner will be ready in minutes when you get home!

Italian Sausage with Rice

1 pound lean turkey Italian sausage	1 can pinto beans
1 cup low sodium spaghetti sauce	1 green bell pepper, cut into strips
1 small onion, halved and sliced	½ tsp salt
¼ tsp black pepper	hot sauce as desired
Hot cooked rice to serve	fresh basil for garnish if desired

Cut sausage into 1-inch pieces. Brown in large skillet over medium heat. Drain. Rinse and drain beans. Combine sausage, beans, spaghetti sauce, pepper, onion, salt and pepper in slow cooker. Cover, cook on LOW 4 to 6 hours. Taste and season with hot sauce as desired. Serve over rice. Sprinkle with chopped fresh basil for more flavor.

Makes 5 servings.