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Slow Cooker Meals!

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Let's imagine you just picked up your children from after-school activities. They ask, "What's for dinner?" If you have no dinner plans, the drive-through or pizza delivery may sound like the best options. However, you might want to save take-out meals as a once-in-a-while treat. While they are quick and convenient, take-out meals often are less nutritious and more expensive.

Now imagine this: You have just walked in the door and are greeted by the aroma of a tender beef stew simmering in your slow cooker. You slice a loaf of whole-wheat bread and toss a simple spinach and strawberry salad. Dinner is served! Evenings like this can go from a dream to reality when using a slow cooker.

Benefits of Using a Slow Cooker

- A slow cooker uses less electricity than an oven.
- Slow cookers are useful throughout the year. Coming in from a cold winter day, the aroma of hot soup is welcoming. Slow cookers also work well for summertime use; they do not heat the kitchen the way an oven might.
- As a result of the long, low-temperature cooking, slow cookers help tenderize less-expensive cuts of meat.
- Slow cookers usually allow one-step preparation. Placing all the ingredients in the slow cooker saves preparation time and cuts down on cleanup.
- A variety of foods can be cooked in a slow cooker, including soups, stews and casseroles.

Know Your Slow Cooker

Most slow cookers have two or three settings. When using the low setting, food will cook in six to 10 hours. Using the high setting allows food to cook in four to six hours. 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.



Slow Cooker Safety

Here are some basic safety rules to follow when using a slow cooker:

- Wash your hands before, during and after food preparation.
- Always start with a clean slow cooker, utensils and work surface.
- **Always thaw** meat and poultry in the refrigerator before cooking in the slow cooker. This will ensure complete cooking.
- Consult the instructions that came with your slow cooker for recommendations on large cuts of meat and poultry. Slow cookers are available in different sizes, so the instructions will vary. If you cannot find the instructions, you can cut the meat into smaller chunks to ensure thorough, safe cooking. Add the liquid, such as broth, water or barbecue sauce, suggested in the recipe and keep the lid in place during cooking.
- If you cut up meats or vegetables ahead of cooking, refrigerate these perishable foods in separate containers until you are ready to use them.
- Because vegetables cook slower than meat and poultry, place the vegetables in the slow cooker first. Place the meat on top of the vegetables and top with liquid, such as broth, water or a sauce.
- For easy cleanup and care of your slow cooker, spray the inside of the cooker with nonstick cooking spray before using it. Slow cooker liners also ease cleanup.
- Fill the slow cooker no less than half full and no more than two-thirds full. Cooking too little or too much food in the slow cooker can affect cooking time, quality and/or safety (if filled too full).
- If possible, set your slow cooker on high for the first hour, then turn the heat setting to low to finish cooking. **Keep the lid in place. Removing the lid slows cooking time.**
- If you are not home during the entire slow-cooking process and the power goes out, throw away food even if it looks done. If you are home during the cooking process, finish cooking the ingredients by some other means, such as on an outdoor grill. If the food was completely cooked before the power went out, the food will remain safe for up to two hours.
- Measure the temperature of your foods before eating them. Follow the recommended safe internal temperatures below:
 - 145 F – Fresh beef, veal, lamb, pork (steaks, roasts, chops); allow a three-minute rest time after removing from heat
 - 145 F – Fin fish (or cook until flesh is opaque)
 - 160 F – Eggs; ground meat and meat mixtures (beef, pork, veal, lamb, turkey, chicken)
 - 165 F – Casseroles; poultry (chicken, turkey, duck, goose)

Handle Leftovers Safely

Using a slow cooker often results in leftovers. For safety reasons, do not store leftovers in a deep container (such as the slow cooker). Instead, refrigerate leftovers in shallow containers (with the food about 2 inches deep).

Do not reheat leftovers in your slow cooker. Instead, reheat leftovers on the stove or in the microwave or oven until the internal temperature reaches 165 F. When the food has reached 165 F, it may be placed in the slow cooker on low or warm during serving.

Converting Recipes for Your Slow Cooker

Most recipes can be converted to cooking in your slow cooker. Because liquids do not boil away in a slow cooker, in most cases, you can reduce liquids by one-third to one-half. In soups, this will not matter. Add pasta at the end of the cooking process or it may become mushy. You may want to cook pasta separately and add it just before serving. Milk, cheese and cream may be added one hour before serving.

Time Chart for Adapting Recipes

Recipe Says	Cook on Low	Cook on High
15 to 30 minutes	4 to 6 hours	1½ to 2 hours
35 to 45 minutes	6 to 10 hours	3 to 4 hours
50 minutes to 3 hours	8 to 16 hours	4 to 6 hours

Recipes

Key to Abbreviations

tsp. = teaspoon

Tbsp. = tablespoon

c. = cup

oz. = ounce

pkg. = package

g = grams

mg = milligrams

lb. = pound

Chicken Curry

- 2¾ lb. chicken breasts, without skin
- 1 (16-oz.) jar salsa (mild or medium)
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 2 Tbsp. curry powder
- 1 c. fat-free sour cream

Place chicken in slow cooker. Combine salsa, onions and curry powder and pour over chicken. Cover with lid. Cook on low for eight to 10 hours (or high for five 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.

*Makes 10 servings.
Each serving has 190 calories,
3.5 g fat, 9 g carbohydrate, 1 g fiber
and 350 mg sodium.*

Menu Idea:
Chicken Curry, brown rice,
sugar snap peas, orange
slices, low-fat milk

Cowboy Beans

- 4 strips bacon, fried crisp, drained and crumbled
- 1 lb. lean or extra-lean ground beef, browned and drained
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- ¼ c. brown sugar
- 1 c. ketchup (low-sodium)
- ¼ c. vinegar
- ¼ c. mustard
- 1 (15-oz.) can kidney beans, drained and rinsed
- 1 (15-oz.) can butter beans, drained and rinsed
- 1 (15-oz.) can lima beans, drained and rinsed
- 1 (28-oz.) can baked beans (do not drain)

Brown meat and fry bacon. Mix all ingredients and cook in a slow cooker on high for three hours or low for eight hours.

*Makes 12 servings. Each serving
has 260 calories, 6 g fat,
34 g carbohydrate,
8 g fiber and
490 mg sodium.*

Menu Idea:
Cowboy Beans, cornmeal
muffins, carrot sticks, peach
slices, low-fat milk

Vegetable Soup

- 1 lb. lean or extra-lean ground beef, browned and drained
- 1 (15-oz.) can tomato sauce (low-sodium)
- 1 (14.25-oz.) can low-sodium beef broth and 1 can water
- 1 (16-oz.) can stewed tomatoes (low-sodium)
- 1 envelope dry onion soup mix
- 1 (10-ounce) pkg. frozen mixed vegetables

Mix all ingredients together in a slow cooker and cook on low seven to nine hours.

*Makes eight servings. Each serving has 220 calories,
8 grams (g) fat, 15 g carbohydrate, 3 g fiber and
480 mg sodium.*

Menu Idea:
Vegetable Soup, dinner
rolls, baked apples,
low-fat milk

Slow Cooker Taco Soup

- 1 lb. lean or extra-lean ground beef
- 1 onion, chopped
- 1 (16-oz.) can chili beans, with liquid
- 1 (15-oz.) can kidney beans, with liquid
- 1 (15-oz.) can whole-kernel corn, with liquid
- 1 (8-oz.) can tomato sauce (low-sodium)
- 2 c. water
- 2 (14.5-oz.) cans peeled and diced tomatoes (low-sodium)
- 1 (4-oz.) can diced green chili peppers
- 1 pkg. taco seasoning mix (low-sodium)

In a medium skillet, cook the ground beef until browned over medium heat. Drain. Place the ground beef, onion, chili beans, kidney beans, corn, tomato sauce, water, diced tomatoes, green chili peppers and taco seasoning mix in a slow cooker. Mix to blend and cook on low setting for eight hours.

Makes 10 servings. Each serving has 220 calories, 3 grams (g) fat, 30 g carbohydrate, 6 g fiber and 500 mg sodium.

Menu Idea:
Slow Cooker Taco Soup,
baked tortilla chips, apple
slices, low-fat milk

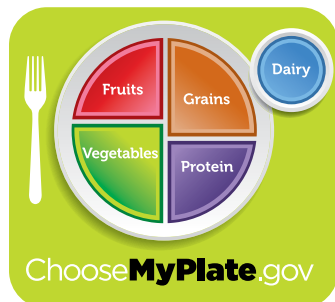
Easy Homemade Spaghetti Sauce

- 1 lb. lean or extra-lean ground beef
- ½ c. chopped green bell pepper
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 1 (16-oz.) can stewed tomatoes (low-sodium)
- 1 (15-oz.) can tomato sauce (low-sodium)
- 1 envelope spaghetti sauce seasoning
- ½ c. chopped onion
- 1 c. chopped celery
- 1 (6-oz.) can tomato paste (low-sodium)
- 2 c. water

Brown meat with onion, pepper and garlic. Drain well and put into slow cooker with remaining ingredients. Cover; cook on high until sauce comes to a boil and then turn to low and simmer for six hours.

Makes 10 servings. Each serving has 170 calories, 6 g fat, 13 g carbohydrate, 2 g fiber and 420 mg sodium.

Menu Idea:
Easy Homemade Spaghetti
Sauce over spaghetti noodles,
lettuce salad, mixed berries,
low-fat milk



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