



# Nutrition News - January 2023

## Healthy Kitchen Hacks: Mastering the Slow Cooker

Slow cooking has been a "hot" trend since nearly the beginning of time. As soon as humans could cook, they were preparing their meals of plants, herbs and game over open fire. The slow-cooking method has gained momentum in recent decades, thanks in large part to the introduction of the Crock Pot in 1971. It's hard to argue against this method of food preparation. It enhances flavor, is kind to your wallet, requires minimal time and effort, and often enriches nutrition.

### Benefits Beyond Nutrients: The Science

What's more, the perks of slow cooking extend beyond increasing the bioavailability of nutrients in plant foods. If you cook meat in a liquid at low heat, you can help reduce the number of cell-damaging compounds known as AGEs (advanced glycation end products) that are produced in the meat by 50 percent, compared with broiling or grilling. That's why slow cooking is arguably one of the safest ways to cook meats, as AGEs typically found in charred and grilled meats have been linked with inflammation, diabetes, heart disease and cancer.

*Here's how to get the most out of your slow cooker and avoid common mistakes.*

**Layer it right.** Since heating elements are on the bottom and sides of a slow cooker, ingredients should be placed in a certain order: Hearty, tough vegetables cut into similar size pieces go on the bottom and stacked up the sides. These include potatoes, turnips, parsnips, carrots, beets, soaked dry beans and winter squash. The next layer is less-dense vegetables such as celery, fennel, green beans and bell peppers. To avoid

overcooking, meat, poultry and tofu generally are placed above hearty vegetables; meat juices drip down and flavor the entire pot.

Quick-cooking, delicate vegetables and canned beans must be placed on the top to preserve their texture and individual flavors; these include zucchini, spinach, cauliflower, broccoli and peas.

Slow cooker recipes should include liquid to prevent food from sticking; if a recipe does not, add about ½ cup water, broth or juice.

**Spend an extra eight minutes.** That is about how long it takes to sauté onions and garlic or brown meat to add extra flavor. To minimize the risk of foodborne illness and remove extra fat, brown ground meat before adding it to the slow cooker. If time is tight, add onions and garlic to the middle layer with the celery.

**Manage frozen meat.** Defrost meat or poultry in the refrigerator and cut into smaller pieces before putting it in the slow cooker.

**Flash-cook fish.** For moist, flavorful fillets, add raw fresh or thawed fish after slow-cooking vegetables for several hours. Three or four fillets cook in about 20 minutes or less when nestled in the steaming vegetables and liquid. It's harder to overcook fish because the window of doneness is longer than with higher-heat methods.

**Garnish galore.** Hearty fresh herbs such as rosemary and thyme can be added on top of food in the slow cooker. Hold off on delicate fresh herbs including parsley, cilantro and basil, however, until the dish is served. Their fresh leaves and crunchy stems can be a welcome contrast to a meal of mostly soft textures.

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**Don't peek.** Lifting a slow cooker's lid just once can delay food's doneness by 20 to 30 minutes. Peeking more than once, especially at the beginning of the cooking process, also can put the dish in the food safety temperature danger zone, where bacteria can rapidly grow.

**Fine-tune the temp.** Soups, stews, chili and casseroles with ground meat are usually fine to cook on the high setting, but poultry can get tough and dry on high. Even on low, boneless chicken breasts cook in about three to four hours. Use a food thermometer to ensure food is cooked to the appropriate internal temperature.

**Beans and slow cookers can coexist.** The moist heat of a slow cooker yields beans with soft skins like the texture of canned beans. Soak dry beans overnight, drain and then add beans to the slow cooker and cover with 2 inches of water. Add dry spices such as oregano, cumin or black pepper that can withstand the long bubbling time. A small amount of meat or ham hock adds giant amounts of flavor. *Note:* Because kidney beans have especially high levels of lectin, which can cause problems during digestion, preparing them in a slow cooker is not recommended; rather, you should boil kidney beans at a high temperature to reduce lectin content.

**Pasta advice:** Add 1 pound of tube-shaped pasta such as penne, ziti or rigatoni to a 6-quart slow cooker, then stir in a 28-ounce can of low-sodium crushed tomatoes, a 24-ounce jar of pasta sauce and a 15-ounce container of ricotta cheese. Cook on low for about three hours. Add 1 cup shredded mozzarella during the last 10 minutes of cooking.

## Recipe: French Wild Rice Vegetable Soup

### Ingredients

- 5 cups water
- 1 14.5 oz can diced tomatoes
- 1 cube vegetable boullion
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- ½ cup uncooked wild rice
- 1 medium carrot, sliced
- 1 small zucchini, sliced
- 1 cup sliced leeks
- 1 teaspoon Herbes de Provence (seasoning blend)
- Dash black pepper

### Slow Cooking Instructions

1. Combine all ingredients in a large crock pot.
2. Cover and cook on HIGH for 3 hours or on LOW for 6 hours.

### Quick Stove Top Variation Instructions (if you don't have a slow cooker)

1. Place all ingredients in a large pot.
2. Cover with a tight lid and bring to a boil.
3. Reduce heat to a simmer and cook for about 1 hour, until wild rice and vegetables are tender.

\*\*\*May need to add additional water to replace water lost in evaporation. Should make a thick, hearty soup.

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*Recipe developed by Sharon Palmer, registered dietician*