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Crockpot Tips for Tasty Family Meals

Something about the colder weather makes us long for a warm meal to be waiting for us as we come in the door at night. Well, crockpots are a great way to enjoy family favorites – year around! “Most households have a crockpot, but most rarely use it for more than the Super Bowl nacho dip, or a big pot of chili”, says Susan Mills-Gray, Nutrition & Health Specialist with University of Missouri Extension. Whatever the reason, get that pot out and get to cooking – the following tips really make a difference!

- Have an older crockpot with a nonremovable liner? Use a cooking bag to line the pot – easy clean up!
- To make clean up easier, spray liner with non stick spray prior to adding any food or liquid.
- Crockpots work the best when they are ½ to ¾ full. If you fill a pot to the brim, it can’t regulate the heating of the food correctly; likewise, less than ½ full will cause food to overcook.
- One hour on a high setting is equal to two hours on the low setting.
- A low setting is equal to 200 degrees F. and the high setting is equal to 300 degrees F.
- Want to convert a conventional oven recipe to the crockpot? Use this chart to guide you.

Conventional Recipe	Cooking/Baking Times	
	Crockpot Low Setting	Crockpot High Setting
15-30 minutes	4-6 hours	1.5 to 2 hours
30-45 minutes	6 -10 hours	3-4 hours
45 minutes – 3 hours	8 -18 hours	4-6 hours

- Each time you lift the crock lid you increase the needed cooking time by 20 minutes. Check progress without lifting the lid if possible. Spin the cover until the condensation falls off – this makes it much easier to see inside.
- For food safety purposes you want to get the food inside the crockpot to 140 degrees as quickly as possible (this reduces the chance of bacterial contamination), so use High the first hour, then switch to Low to finish cooking.
- Start with thawed foods. Frozen foods take too long to get to 140 degrees. The extreme temperature difference between the frozen food and the crock can cause breakage. If you have to use a frozen cut of meat, add 1 cup of warm water to the pot first, then place the meat in the crock.
- If you have a removable crock liner, don’t store the food you’ve cooked in the crockpot in that same liner. The removable liner is made from a thick insulated material; the food won’t cool down quickly enough to prevent bacterial growth.
- Dense veggies like potatoes, carrots and other root vegetables take the longest to cook, so place them on the bottom and cut the pieces no thicker than one inch.
- Tender veggies like tomatoes, mushrooms, zucchini and squash overcook easily – add the last two hours of the cooking time.
- Anything high in fat cooks quickly – so place meats on top of vegetables when loading crock.
- Browning meats before adding to crock reduces fat and enhances flavor and color. Fats melt with long cooking times and can produce an unpleasant flavor.

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- Fish and seafood cook quickly – add late in cooking.
- Soak dried beans overnight before cooking.
- Milk curdles over long cooking times – add sour cream or cream late in cooking.
- Condensed cream soups are a good substitute for milk and they don't break down over long cooking times.
- Ground herbs and spices tend to lose their flavor through long cooking times -- so add late in cooking.
- Cayenne pepper and Tabasco sauce tend to become bitter after long cooking times – again add late in cooking.

For more information contact your local University of Missouri Extension Center or this faculty member directly at mills-grays@missouri.edu

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