

Kitchen Korner

Slow Cooker Doubles As Personal Chef

(NAPSA)—A personal chef who prepares dinner while you're out of the house? Who wouldn't want one? But you may already have an electric version. It's called a slow cooker, and, with very little planning and effort, you can open the front door and be greeted by the inviting smells of beef stew or homemade chicken soup.

This countertop appliance cooks foods slowly at a low temperature—generally between 170°F and 280° F. The low heat helps less expensive, leaner cuts of meat become tender and shrink less.

According to the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline, “Direct heat from the pot, lengthy cooking, and steam created within the tightly covered container combine to destroy bacteria and make slow cooking a safe process.”

To Be Food Safe, follow these helpful hints for safe cooking in a slow cooker.

- Select recipes with a high moisture content, such as chili, soup, stew or spaghetti sauce. Always thaw meat or poultry before putting it into a slow cooker.

- If using a commercially frozen slow cooker product, prepare it according to manufacturer's instructions.

- A clean cooker, clean utensils and a clean work area are essential. Wash hands with warm water and soap and wash utensils with hot soapy water before and after preparing food.

- If you cut up ingredients in advance, it's easy to place them in the slow cooker before leaving



home. Keep perishable foods refrigerated until placing them in the cooker.

- Use the right amount of food. Fill the cooker between half and two-thirds full. If using vegetables, place them into the cooker first, add meat or poultry and cover the food with liquid.

- Make sure the slow cooker is turned ON. The Hotline receives calls from panicked cooks who forgot to turn the switch ON and arrive home to uncooked ingredients, which are not safe and must be discarded.

- If possible, turn the cooker on the highest setting for the first hour of cooking time and then to low. However, it's safe to cook foods on low the entire time.

For more food safety information about meat, poultry or egg products, call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1 (888) MPHotline or 1 (888) 674-6854, type a question into “Ask Karen” (www.AskKaren.gov), go to www.fsis.usda.gov or visit befoodsafe.gov.