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.

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)

Recipes to try:

**Slow Cooker Barbecue**

Prep Time: 3 to 5 hours

*Ingredients:*
  - 1-1/2 lb. boneless chuck steak, 1-1/2 inches thick
  - 1 clove garlic, peeled and minced
  - 1/4 cup wine vinegar
  - 1 tablespoon brown sugar
  - 1 teaspoon paprika
  - 2 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
  - 1/2 cup ketchup
  - 1 teaspoon salt
  - 1 teaspoon dry or prepared mustard
  - 1/4 teaspoon black pepper

*Instructions:*
Cut the beef on a diagonal, across the grain into slices 1 inch wide and place in slow cooker. Combine the remaining ingredients and pour over the meat. Mix the meat and sauce together. Cover and cook on low for 3 to 5 hours. Serve on toasted hamburger buns with a mixed garden salad.

**Slow Cooker Lasagna**

*Ingredients:*
  - 1 pound Ground Beef
  - Lasagna noodles
  - 1 jar spaghetti sauce
  - 1 ½ cups cottage cheese
  - 1 ½ cups shredded Mozzarella cheese
  - 2 tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese

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Instructions:
Brown ground beef and drain. Spoon 1 C. spaghetti sauce in bottom of 4 quart crock pot. Mix remaining sauce with beef. Place 2 uncooked lasagna noodles on sauce in crock pot. Spread 1/3 meat mixture on top of noodles. Spread ¾ C. cottage cheese over meat. Sprinkle ½ C. mozzarella cheese over cottage cheese. Add another layer of uncooked noodles, 1/3 meat mixture, the remaining cottage cheese and ½ C. mozzarella cheese. Place another layer of uncooked noodles, meat mixture, and mozzarella cheese. Sprinkle Parmesan cheese over top. Cook on low for 2-4 hours.

Slow Cooker Taco Soup

Ingredients:
✓ 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)

Instructions:
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.

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