

HOME ECONOMICS

GUIDE



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Electric Slow Cookers—Selection

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Slow cooking is a convenient method of food preparation that is being rediscovered in many homes. The idea of slow cooking dates back to the crockery bean pot nestled in hot coals and the cauldron hung over the hearth on a swivel hook. The food cooked slowly and evenly with little attention from the busy homemaker.

This same principle of slow, even cooking has more recently been used in electric appliances known as slow cookers. Most of these are low wattage appliances designed to cook at a low temperature for several hours or bring liquids to a slow boil at high settings. The low temperature, combined with a covered container to retain moisture, allows the cooking time to vary by several hours without affecting taste or appearance.

Ease of preparation is also a big plus for the electric slow cooker. Many meals can be prepared by simply putting all the ingredients into the pot at one time, covering it, and setting the slow cooker at the proper temperature. These factors make the electric slow cooker a popular appliance for the two-worker family, student, or busy homemaker. The slow cooker can help the food budget since less expensive cuts may be cooked satisfactorily. The energy use is low, so it helps the utility bill, too.

Types of Electric Slow Cookers

Slow cookers are available in a wide variety of styles,

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shapes, sizes, and in several combinations of materials. The following are some of the variations the prospective consumer should be aware:

● Materials

Electric slow cookers are most often made from combinations of materials. The exterior surface in most slow cookers is made of steel, aluminum or a heat-resistant plastic. The interior surface may be stoneware, glass, aluminum, or porcelain enamel. Stoneware and glass are slower heat conductors, give better insulation and cook more even than the metal slow cookers. They may be more difficult to clean, and sudden temperature changes or a sharp blow may cause them to crack.

● Lids

The lids of slow cookers also are available in glass, stoneware, metal or heat-resistant plastic. Glass and stoneware lids can become extremely hot while plastic lids remain cooler. Metal lids generally have a knob for lifting made of heat-resistant material. "Lid lifters" and "peekers" who must see what is going on inside should consider a glass or transparent plastic lid to avoid moisture and heat escape when checking cooking progress. Vents in the lid allow versatility.

● Construction

The greatest difference in the construction of electric slow cookers is in the heating element position. The one-piece models and the models with a removable liner may either have the element wrapped around the sides

between the exterior and interior materials or it may be coiled beneath the bottom of the interior. Other slow cookers have a separate heating base where the pot sits. The side wrapped element seems to heat more evenly. Removable liners and the models with a base may be immersed making them easier to clean. The separate heating base also may be used to warm other kinds of cookware.

- **Size and Shape**

Slow cooker capacities range from 1½ quarts to 8 quarts. Several manufacturers recommend the pot be filled at least half full, so family size, lifestyle and food preference should be considered in selecting the best size. A 3½ quart cooker will be large enough to cook a meal for 4 to 6 people.

Personal preference and foods to be cooked will determine whether a round, oval, "pot-shaped," or casserole style will be best.

- **Temperature Ranges and Controls**

Electric slow cookers have either built-in continuous heat control in which the switch must be set in a "Low - Medium - High" or "Off - Low - High" position, or an infinite thermostatic heat control which means any temperature can be set within the range 150°F to 450°F provided may be set. Temperatures for either of these types should be indicated on the controls or in a use-and-care book accompanying the appliance. Temperatures above 160° are necessary while cooking to insure safety from bacterial growth. The continuous control makes it easier to separate the normal cooking temperatures from the special-purpose temperatures such as those to be used only for warming, which may extend below the safe temperature range, or those reaching a very high temperature, as in a combination slow cooker and deep-fat fryer. A thermostatic dial could even have a number of temperatures above the lowest setting which would not be sufficient to destroy bacterial growth.

- **Energy Usage.**

Most slow cookers are low wattage appliances in which the elements are on constantly like a light bulb. These use considerably less energy than most other cooking appliances. Models which have high temperatures to be used for browning or deep-fat frying will use more electricity than one which is strictly a slow cooker. However, they do combine two types of cooking appliance in one.

Points To Check When Comparing

- Are the handles and legs heat resistant? Handles near the top of the pot make it easier and safer to use. Handles should also be large enough and far away from the heated exterior surface so the pot can be moved safely.
- Controls should be clearly marked and easy to use.
- Short cords are a safety precaution to eliminate dangerously dangling cords. Many pots have the cord

attached, meaning the pot is non-immersible. Others have the probe-type cord.

- Temperatures should be explained on the panel or in a use-and-care book.

- The lowest temperature for cooking should be no lower than 160°F. *Crockery Cookery*, by Mable Hoffman, and other sources give temperature ranges and the length of time required to reach a given temperature for various brands and models of slow cookers. (See References)

- Does the cooker have an "off" position or must it be unplugged in order to turn it off? An "off" position is safer.

- The appliance should have the Underwriters' Laboratory Seal of Approval.

- The warranty should explain which parts of the appliance are covered and for how long. Can the appliance be serviced locally while under warranty or must it be shipped to a service center for repair?

- How much wattage does the appliance use on different temperature settings?

- What are the individual or family needs? Will this cooking method be an advantage to their lifestyle?

- Check the weight of the appliance.

- Is the appliance easy to clean and to keep attractive?

- Does the home have adequate counter and storage space so the appliance will be convenient to use and store?

Technically, a slow cooker is an electric, self-contained cooking appliance featuring one or more heat settings, which cooks food safely for several hours at the lowest heat setting and brings liquids to a slow boil at the highest heat setting.

In 1976, 25.5 percent of all wired homes had a slow cooker. Of 19 popular electrical appliances, the slow cooker ranked third in units distributed in one year.

The slow cooker was introduced in 1971; now more than 20 models are on the market. While brands differ in size, shape, construction, and interior and exterior finishes, the major difference among the models is the method of heat distribution and control.

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