



Nutrition News You Can Use

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Not your mom's slow-cooker

Fans affectionately refer to them with names like "recession-fighting machines" and "crackpots." For many, it's all about the convenience. Others comment: "I like that the house smells good all afternoon. I like that it eliminates the 5 o'clock panic of, 'Oh, my gosh, what am I going to throw together for dinner?' I like that I can make enough at a time to have leftovers. I like that the cheaper cuts of meat often work best."

It all started with the Crock-Pot. Rival introduced the slow cooker to the market with the Crock-Pot brand in 1971. Almost overnight, the Crock-Pot enjoyed a popularity matched only by the fondue pot and defined a certain kind of culinary "chic" for the decade.

It "cooks all day while the cook's away," one 1976 advertisement declared. The Crock-Pot promised complete meals, cooked slowly over long periods of time, costing mere pennies to operate and requiring little, if any, supervision. By the end of the 1970s, sales of slow cookers, including the Crock-Pot, decreased dramatically.

Of course, the slow cooker also had its detractors -- and most complaints were about the food. Many thought everything tasted the same no matter what was in the pot. Others claimed the food dried out despite the closed cooking environment (the lid should prevent moisture from escaping). Some complained about the lack of flavor, others about the lack of visual appeal. Still others said the slow cooker just made mush. The earlier recipes were more concerned with the convenience of the appliance and the quality of the food produced was an afterthought.

People liked the convenience of the slow cooker, they just didn't necessarily like what had been cooked in them. Recipes began to evolve -- slowly -- as interest in the slow cooker grew once again over the last several years. And the cookers evolved too, with manufacturers offering different sizes and inserts (some that allow for conventional stove-top cooking) as well as offering programmable timers, "smart" settings and digital probes. Slow cookers improved cosmetically too.

Today, about 83% of American households own a slow cooker, according to a leading marketing research firm. Of these households, almost half used a slow cooker within the past month. Much of this can be attributed to the fact that more people are cooking at home finding that this can help stretch their food budgets.

Stephanie O'Dea blogged about using her slow cooker every day last year. Also known as the "Crockpot Lady," her adventures (crockpot365.blogspot.com) were a hit, landing her a spot on the "Rachael Ray" show and spawning a cookbook, due out this fall. She believes the slow-cooker resurgence has a lot to do with the economy. "With the recession, people have realized they need to make real food at home."

The obvious advantage to a slow cooker is the long, slow cooking process. Start with a recipe that complements this process, keeping in mind that tough, inexpensive cuts of meat are often perfect. The long, slow cooking process

tenderizes the fat and connective tissue in the meat to a buttery texture. Cut the meat into large cubes -- don't cook a single large piece of meat in a slow cooker because the length of time it takes to cook through could render it unsafe to eat.

Perhaps the most important thing is just getting to know your slow cooker. Many models today heat more quickly than in the past (a recipe written 20 years ago calling for eight hours of cooking time might be done in six with one of today's models), and because there's no industry standard with respect to heat, the "high" and "low" temperature settings vary -- sometimes dramatically -- between makes and models.

Start with the recipes in the booklet that comes with the unit -- generally they've been well-tested for that particular machine. Master them, then play around.

A slow cooker can make a perfect "second" oven, freeing the main oven for the main course or other dishes when company's expected. It's also perfect for summer cooking -- use the cooker instead of an oven to keep the kitchen cool.

Finally, consider the slow cooker for desserts -- the low, consistent heat is perfect for dense cakes, crumbles and even custards. Try it with bread pudding: Assemble and bake the pudding in the slow cooker, then serve as is or put it in a hot oven for 10 or 15 minutes -- the custard will soufflé and get a wonderful crunchy crust. Serve it with a warm caramel sauce for an easy dessert.

So dig into the back of your kitchen cabinets and unearth your old slow-cooker, or splurge and buy one of the newer models. Remember: Good and convenient things really can come to those who wait.

Budget savvy grocery list

With the cost of food rising, more people are asking how to afford healthy foods. Here are Examples of how to be wise and savvy with a shopping list.

- Read the per ounce price and compare products.
- Buy generic instead of brand names.
- Make a grocery list and only buy what you need.
- Plan a 5 day menu for you or your family and stick with it. Monday: Italian food; Tuesday: American food; Wednesday: Mexican food; Thursday: grill your food; Friday: make your own pizza.
- Look for the sales in the newspaper. Sometimes you can find fresh salmon on sale. It might be worth the trip to that grocery store for a Sunday meal.
- Clip coupons.
- Don't buy cookies, desserts, or other snack foods that are high in calories and sugar.
- Don't spend money on sodas or other beverages such as waters with vitamins. Use your tea bags to make iced teas.
- Drink tap water and don't spend money on water bottles.
- Buy whole wheat pasta, whole wheat bread or brown rice. You will feel fuller faster and eat less.
- Keep protein foods such as chicken and meat to 3 ounce portion which is the size of the deck of cards. Make stir fry, kabobs, cut the chicken breast lengthwise, to split into two portions.
- When shopping for food in bulk, buy frozen foods and vegetables.
- If you buy bread in bulk, or you buy it on sale, freeze them for later.
- Buy frozen seafood or fish and only cook what you need. Do the same with frozen chicken.
- Buy low sodium soups, canned vegetables with "no added salt" and canned fruits for desserts with "no sugar added."
- Buy heads of lettuce for your salad. Do your own chopping and cleaning.



- Buy canned tomatoes for your sauces and canned refried beans for your dips or burritos.
- Limit convenience foods that you know how to prepare. You can open a can of tuna and pack it for lunch. Instead of buying it already packed for you.
- Last, do not throw away any foods. Use leftovers when cooking or eat leftovers one night of the week.

What does "Certified Organic" really mean?

Buying organic is becoming more and more popular as some worry about the health and safety of the foods they eat. But what does it mean for a food to be organic? According to the National Organic Program of the USDA, organic meat, poultry, eggs and dairy products come from animals that are given no antibiotics or growth hormones.



Organic food is produced without using most conventional pesticides, fertilizers made with synthetic ingredients or sewer sludge, bioengineering or ionizing radiation. For a food to be certified as organic, the product must come from a farm and processing plant that is certified as organic. This means they go through an inspection process from certified government officials that ensure organic farms are up to the USDA organic standards.

It's the responsibility of the inspectors to assure that only organic methods are used and that there is no impact on the environment, such as contamination from pesticides, synthetic fertilizers or other non-organic compounds.

Just as food labels must meet standards to say that they are "heart healthy," organic foods must meet standards to make the claim that they are organic. The labeling requirements are based on the percentage of organic ingredients in a product. The following definitions and facts can help you understand organic food labels better:

- Agricultural products labeled "100 percent organic" must contain all organically grown ingredients and processing aids.
- Products labeled "organic" must contain at least 95 percent organically produced ingredients, except for added water and salt.
- The USDA seal and the seal or mark of approval involved in certifying agents may appear on product packages and in advertisements.
- Agricultural products labeled "100 percent organic" and "organic" can't be produced using excluded methods, sewage sludge or ionizing radiation.
- If buying processed products labeled "Made with Organic Ingredients," these products need to contain at least 70 percent organic ingredients, and list up to three organic ingredients or food groups on the principal display panel.
- Processed products that "contain less than 70 percent organic ingredients," can't use the term organic anywhere on the principal display panel. However, they may identify specific ingredients that are organically produced on the ingredients statement.

The following photo shows examples of the labels that may be used on a wide variety of products that use organic ingredients.



The sample cereal boxes show the four labeling categories. From left: cereal with 100 percent organic ingredients; cereal with 95-100 percent organic ingredients; cereal made with at least 70 percent organic ingredients; and cereal with less than 70 percent organic ingredients. Products with less than 70 percent organic ingredients may list specific organically produced ingredients on the side panel of the package, but may not make any organic claims on the front of the package. Look for the name and address of the Government-approved certifier on all packaged products that contain at least 70 percent organic ingredients.

Are organic foods better for you than non-organic foods? The verdict is still out on that. One point to consider is that organic products aren't more nutritious than conventionally grown foods. If you compare an organic apple versus a conventional apple, you would receive the same vitamins in the same amounts. The drawback for many with organic products is cost. They're more expensive to grow than conventionally grown foods and that cost shows up in higher prices at the grocery store.

Holiday egg safety tips

When it comes to food safety, the holidays can definitely put us to the test. We *know* we should refrigerate our leftovers right away, but inevitably we find ourselves in the kitchen, picking and nibbling at the remains of the turkey that was served hours earlier.

But if you had to choose just one holiday ritual as the single most dangerous from a food safety standpoint, it would have to be the venerable Easter egg hunt. Think about it: We take highly perishable morsels of food and stash them *outside*, under old logs, behind fence posts or just out in the blazing sun -- maybe for *hours* -- and then send our children to gather them up and eat them! It's a wonder any of us survives past the age of 6.

If you're planning to decorate Easter eggs this year, or if you're preparing hard-



cooked eggs for your Passover seder, here are a dozen egg safety tips to help you and your family stay healthy.

Use one set of eggs for decorating and hunting, and another for eating. Or to be *really* safe, use plastic eggs for your Easter egg hunt instead of real ones.

Keep everything clean. Wash utensils, countertops and other surfaces that eggs come in contact with. That includes washing your hands thoroughly with soap and hot water before and after handling raw eggs or cooked eggs that will be eaten.

Coloring Easter eggs can be fun, but if you're planning to eat the eggs you dye, make sure that you only use food-grade dyes.

Keep hard-cooked eggs intended for eating in the refrigerator until the last possible minute.

Check the temperature of your refrigerator with an appliance thermometer to make sure that it is at 40°F or colder.

Under no circumstances let anyone eat eggs that have been unrefrigerated (whether at room temperature or outside) for more than two hours. That includes hard-cooked egg used as part of the Passover seder.

If you hollow out eggshells by blowing the raw egg through holes in the shell, you could expose yourself to salmonella from raw egg touching your mouth. To be safe, wash the egg in hot water and rinse it in a solution of 1 teaspoon chlorine bleach per half cup of water.

If you plan to use the raw eggs you have blown out of their shells, cook and eat them right away — don't try to store them.

When preparing hard-cooked eggs for an egg hunt, be on the lookout for cracks in the shells. Even tiny cracks can allow bacteria to contaminate the egg. Eggs that have any cracks whatsoever should be discarded.

If you're hiding eggs outside, choose the cleanest hiding places you can, and avoid areas that pets or other animals might visit.

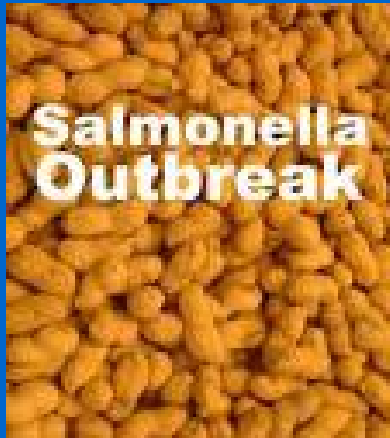
Keep track of time to ensure that the hiding and hunting time don't exceed a cumulative 2 hours. And remember, the eggs that are found must be refrigerated right away — or discarded if the 2 hour limit is exceeded.

Nothing lasts forever! Even hard-cooked eggs that have been refrigerated properly must be eaten within 7 days of cooking.

Peanut update

The current salmonella outbreak caused by tainted peanuts could drag on for as long as two years. "We're really concerned that this is not over yet," said Dr. Stephen Sundlof, the FDA's director of food safety.

The reason is that, unlike vegetables and meat, products made with peanut butter and paste have a long shelf life. If somebody has something hidden in the back of the pantry, and pulls it out a year from now and eats it, there could potentially be a new illness.



The FDA has been doing its best to keep its [database of recalled products](#) up to date. New products are being added every day—the number now tops 2,600—so consumers should check it periodically for the foods they eat or feed their pets.

The outbreak has been traced to peanuts processed by the Peanut Corporation of America. It was originally thought that all the tainted products originated in the Blakely plant. But Texas officials have now confirmed that peanut meal samples taken from the Plainview plant were contaminated with the same strain of salmonella as that found in Blakely.

An FDA spokeswoman confirmed that PCA shipped mostly "seasoned" products, such as honey roasted peanuts and hot and spicy peanuts, from its Georgia plant to its Texas plant and shipped peanut meal from the Texas plant to the Georgia plant, according to the Associated Press. The FDA's investigation is ongoing and the agency is looking at both the PCA Blakely plant and the PCA Plainview plant as sources of contamination for the outbreak.

The case count according to the Centers of Disease Control is 666 illnesses in 45 states with the most recent reported illness beginning on February 3, 2009. The outbreak has contributed to nine deaths. Most of the illnesses have been associated with products from the Blakely plant.

Despite all the news coverage of the outbreak, consumers are still confused about the products being recalled. National brands of jarred peanut butter have not been implicated. The items being recalled use peanuts as an ingredient and include energy bars, baked goods, cookies and crackers, ice cream, dry-roasted peanuts, dog treats and even suet for wild birds. If you have any of these products on your shelves, your best bet is to read the labels and check the FDA's database. And when in doubt, throw it out.
