Easy-Peasy! Slow-Cooking Made Easy!

Don’t have time or too tired to cook dinner after a long day? Then it’s time to dust off (or purchase) your slow cooker! And since January and February are our coldest months here in San Antonio, now is the best time to come home to a hot, home-cooked meal!

Many people refer to their slow cooker as a “Crock-Pot” which is actually a popular brand name of slow cooker (like “Kleenex” is to facial tissue). A simple, decent-sized slow cooker costs $25-$30 and provides a quick and easy way to prepare healthful meals. There are more expensive slow cookers on the market, with extra bells and whistles like programmable timers, but as a rule, all these “extras” aren’t really necessary.

Generally speaking, slow cooker recipes are quite healthy, because they rarely call for added fats and oils; they use water, natural juices (and time!) to cook. Less-expensive (but often tough) cuts of meat can be used in the slow cooker, because the long cooking time and the moist environment allows for a tender, juicy final product. Although slow-cooker recipes take 4-8 hours until completion, the beauty of the slow cooker is that you can simply walk away, while the slow cooker works its magic!

And slow cooker cooking is so easy! A quick internet search will result in thousands of recipes; some require more prep work than others. Some are simply entrees, i.e. “meat”; others contain grains, fruits, and vegetables too. The recipes I’ve compiled below provide foods from a variety of food groups with an assortment of nutrients. Perhaps most importantly, I selected these recipes because they allow you to dump everything in the crock pot in the morning (with very little prep work and no measuring) and turn it on “low” before rushing off to school and/or work. And the best part is that when you come home in the afternoon/evening, your whole place smells like a wonderfully prepared meal, and dinner is essentially done! If you want even faster and easier clean up, you can purchase slow cooker liners. When you’re done eating, simply pull the liner out of the slow cooker and toss! You don’t even have to clean the slow cooker! So, forget the drive-thru junk food and try these easy-peasy-“slow”-n-easy recipes!

Pork Tacos:
Super-easy and flavorful! Basically, you just put a trimmed piece of pork tenderloin in the slow cooker and cover it with HEB’s “That Green Sauce” and let it cook all day. When it’s cooked through, shred the meat with 2 forks and add some pico de gallo before serving it on corn tortillas. These tacos pair well with a side of pinto or black beans. Check out the details below:

1. Spray slow cooker with non-stick spray.
2. Trim visible fat from pork tenderloin and place in slow cooker.
3. Pour HEB’s “That Green Sauce” (in the salsa/condiment aisle) over the pork tenderloin – just enough to cover the pork (about 1/3-1/2 jar) and cook on low for 6-8 hours or until cooked through.
4. When pork is cooked, shred it with 2 forks.
5. Mix in 1 12-oz container of pico de gallo (fresh, in the produce department)

6. Serve on corn tortillas; top with “queso fresco” cheese crumbles and a squeeze of lime.

Nutrition Info:
2 tacos (3 oz pork, 2 tbsp sauce, ½ cup pico de gallo, 1 oz cheese, 2 corn tortillas): 373 calories, 28 g protein, 30 g carbohydrate, 15.5 g fat, 3 g fiber

Pasta-free “Spaghetti” and Meat Sauce

The “noodles” in this dish are actually the stringy insides of the yellow spaghetti squash. After cutting the squash in ½ and scraping out the seeds, all you have to do is place the squash in the slow cooker along with a jar of your favorite pasta sauce and cook it all day. When the squash is cooked through and soft, you scrape out the stringy “noodles” from the squash and add some ground beef – voila! Pasta-free spaghetti! If you don’t feel up to browning the ground beef yourself, you can add some pre-cooked frozen meatballs in the crockpot when you start cooking, but these will typically add more calories, fat, and sodium than preparing the ground beef yourself. Alternatively, you can skip the beef altogether and make this a vegetarian meal. This recipe pairs well with a piece of whole wheat garlic bread and/or a side salad with light dressing. Here are the details:

1. Spray slow cooker with non-stick spray.
2. Cut spaghetti squash in ½ widthwise, and use a spoon to scoop out the seeds and stringy bits from the center. Place each ½ of the squash, cut-side down, in the slow cooker.
3. Pour 1 jar of vegetable marinara pasta sauce (or pasta sauce of your choice) in the slow cooker, around the squash, and cook on low for 6 hours.
4. Carefully remove squash from the slow cooker (it will be hot!) and let it rest 10-15 minutes (or until it is cool enough to handle).
5. While squash in cooling, brown 1 pound of 96% lean ground beef in a skillet. Drain any fat. Pour meat into the crock pot.
6. Using a fork, scrape the flesh of the squash into the crock pot; it will scrape off in stringy noodle-like pieces.
7. Mix the squash “noodles”, pasta sauce, and ground beef together.

Nutrition info:
~2.5 cup serving (1 ½ c squash, ½ c sauce, 4 oz ground beef): 273 calories, 31 g protein, 27 g carbohydrate, 6 g fat, 6 g fiber

Easy Mexican-Style Chicken and Rice

What could be easier than dropping some frozen chicken breasts into your slow cooker and covering it with your favorite salsa? I serve this chicken/salsa mixture over brown rice – I use Uncle Ben’s Ready Rice (“Natural Whole Grain Brown”) because I don’t dirty any extra pots/pans to make it – I just zap it in the microwave in its packaging for 90 seconds. The nutrient analysis below corresponds to the chicken/salsa over brown rice; however, you can make a large batch of this chicken and use it to top nachos, salads, quesadillas, or anything else that you want to add chicken to (if you use more chicken, use more salsa). See the details below:
1. Place 4 large, frozen chicken breasts in slow cooker (or as many as you want to cook).
2. Pour 1 jar of your favorite salsa/picante sauce over the chicken, toss to coat, if necessary and cook on low 6-8 hours. (I like HEB Specialty Roasted salsa and used this brand in my nutrient analysis below).
3. When the chicken is cooked, shred it with 2 forks and let it cook 15-20 minutes more, to absorb juices/salsa.
4. Serve on top of 1 cup brown rice
5. If it seems dry, scoop some of the juices from the bottom of the slow cooker and mix into the rice/chicken mixture.

Nutrition Info:
~2 cup serving (1 cup rice, 4 oz chicken breast, 3 tbsp salsa): 380 calories, 37 g protein, 43 g carbohydrate, 5 g fat, 2 g fiber

For more easy, healthy recipes or to discuss any other nutrition-related concerns, be sure to schedule a (free!) one-hour session with Campus Recreation’s registered dietitian, Annie Bell, by sending an email of request to fitness@utsa.edu. Full instructions on how to make an appointment are here: https://campusrec.utsa.edu/fitness-wellness/activities/nutrition