**Pressure Cooking**

Of all the functions on a multicooker, pressure cooking is the one you’ll probably use most often. It’s much faster than the stove or the oven and lets you take certain shortcuts, like making beans without soaking them first. It’s also amazing for braising meats, which never dry out and always cook up tender and luscious.

#### HOW DOES A PRESSURE COOKER WORK?

Dating to the 17th century, the first pressurized cooking pot was developed by the French physicist Denis Papin. Basically a pot with a tight-sealing lid and a steam valve, **a pressure cooker traps the steam rising from the boiling liquid in the pot, which, in turn, raises the temperature at which that liquid boils.** (For example, without pressure, water at sea level boils at 212 degrees. Under pressure, that temperature can rise to as much as 266 degrees.) The higher temperature, combined with the pressure in the pot that forces the hot steam into the ingredients, cooks food much faster than traditional methods.

**A pressure cooker works at different pressure levels,** each one changing the boiling point of the liquid. **With most pressure cookers today, the pressure gauge is preset for two options.**At low pressure (10 pounds per square inch, or p.s.i.), the internal temperature reaches 235 degrees. At high pressure (15 pounds p.s.i.), it can reach 250 degrees. A steam valve allows excess steam to escape, keeping the pressure cooker from exploding, but, as countless tales of split pea soups on the ceiling attest, it has historically been an imperfect method. **Modern pressure cookers — stovetop and electric — are quite safe.**They don’t explode as your grandmother’s may have. But, by eliminating the guesswork, electric pressure cookers take the anxiety out of the process.

**For a long time, stovetop pressure cookers were the only style available.**As the name suggests, they’re heated on the stove, and set to high or low pressure. **As the pressure inside increases, the gauge on its lid pops up**, indicating that the inside of the pot has reached the optimal pressure. Once there, the heat needs to be adjusted to keep the pot’s temperature and pressure constant. This is to avoid over-pressurizing (which can burn the food inside or, in extreme cases, explode). It also keeps the pressure and temperature from falling before the food is done. Monitoring the pressure isn’t hard, but you do need to keep an eye on it.

**With an electric pressure cooker, everything is done automatically.**Once it reaches the correct pressure and temperature, it will stay there without the cook’s having to do anything. For that reason, you can set it and walk away, much as you would with a slow cooker. **And don’t worry: It won’t explode.**It will simply turn itself off if the pressure or temperature ever rise too high.

#### USING YOUR ELECTRIC PRESSURE COOKER

**Check your recipe, and set the device to the correct pressure level (high or low), then add the amount of time you’d like things to cook.** High pressure is used for most recipes, with low used more often for quicker cooking and more delicate ingredients, like seafood, custards, some rice dishes and eggs.

**Once the device is set, the clock won’t immediately begin to count down:**The pot must first build pressure. Depending on its contents, this will take 5 to 20 minutes. Always double-check that the steam valve is in the locked, sealed position. (Incorrectly sealing the vent is a common mistake for multicooker novices. Pressure cannot build if the device is venting.)

#### MANUAL VERSUS NATURAL RELEASE

When the cooking time is up, the multicooker will automatically change to the “keep warm” function and begin slowly losing pressure.**It can take up to 30 minutes to release naturally.**

If the recipe calls for an immediate manual release, turn the steam valve to its venting position, and the pressure will release in a minute or so, gushing forth in a burst of steam.

**Keep your hand away from the top of the valve** (not above it) so as not to burn yourself when the hot steam erupts. Some people like to turn the valve from a distance, with the help of a tongs or the handle of a wooden spoon. Or consider covering the valve with a dish towel before opening it, which has the added bonus of keeping the steam from spraying all over your kitchen. If you do end up using your hands, do so carefully, approaching the valve from the side rather than the top.

Some recipes will call for a specific time for natural release, before a manual pressure release.**For this, you’ll want to turn off the pot, and wait for the time called for in the recipe has passed. Then, turn the valve to release the rest of the pressure.** This allows the food to continue to cook for a little longer than a straight manual release, but without keeping the pot on full pressure for that whole time. It makes for a slightly gentler and slower cooking environment.

**The time for a full natural release varies.**(It’s usually 10 to 20 minutes, but can be longer.) The longer the pressure cooker has been on and the more food it has in it, the longer the natural release will take. On most models, you will know when all the pressure has released naturally when the pressure valve falls back into place.

## Slow Cooking

Maybe you want to make your mother’s low-and-slow recipe for brisket. Or perhaps you just feel more secure using a gentler cooking method. That’s when you’ll want to use the slow cooker function instead of the pressure-cooker function. It allows you to cook your food very, very slowly, and it’s perfect for when you want to whip out tried-and-true slow cooker recipes.

1. Originally patented by Irving Naxon in 1940, the slow cooker prepares food low and slowly, using very little energy. Since its inception, it’s become wildly popular, showing up in millions of American homes and getting dinner on the table of many a busy cook.

**If you’re debating between a slow cooker and a multicooker, know that the multicooker will give you more functionality while taking up the same amount of counter space.** If you already have a slow cooker and are short on space, you could replace it with a multicooker, which can either slow cook or pressure cook, giving you a choice.

You may have the option to cook it at high or low, depending on your model. **Some models allow you to slow cook with a separate, clear glass cover so you can monitor your foods.**Others will have you lock the lid on as if you were going to pressure cook the dish — except, crucially, the steam valve should be open so the steam can vent.

## Yogurt Making, Sautéing and Other Uses

True to its name, the multicooker can do more than just pressure cook and slow cook. Depending on your model, it may also feature several settings for preparing yogurt, rice or poultry, as well as sautéeing.

#### YOGURT SETTING

**How you use this function will vary based on the recipe and your model.**Most yogurt functions will heat the pot at 180 degrees to 200 degrees, which kills any errant bacteria in the milk, and helps the yogurt to thicken. Then it keeps the milk at 110 degrees for several hours, during which time it ferments. Consult your manual for exact instructions.

#### SAUTE SETTING

**The sauté function works like a burner on your stove,**heating the inner pot from the bottom up, and allowing you to brown meats and vegetables, and to simmer sauces to reduce them.

**The sauté function on most cookers has several levels, from low to high, allowing you to adjust the heat.** If yours doesn’t, and the food is turning too dark too quickly, turn off the machine for a few minutes to bring down the heat. Then, if necessary, turn it back on. It’s not a perfect solution, but it works well enough. Or,**you can always brown the ingredients on the stove in a skillet, then transfer them to the pot** for the remainder of the cooking. Note that when sautéing, the multicooker’s lid should always be off.

#### OTHER SETTINGS

**You can experiment with any other functions if your model has them (rice, beans, poultry, steam).** They always cook things under pressure, and they’re preprogrammed with the amount of time and pressure level needed for most preparations. But **what you gain in ease, you lose in control.** After all, there may be only one chicken setting, but what if you’re using all dark or all light meat? Bone-in pieces versus boneless? The cooking times for these are all different. Or if you’re making beans, chickpeas take longer to cook than black beans.

**It’s always going to be more precise to follow a recipe** and manually set the exact time and amount of pressure, especially the first time you’re cooking something new in the multicooker. Then **feel free to wing it with the preset buttons as you get more comfortable.**

## Parts and Accessories

Now that you have a handle on what your multicooker can do, it’s worth knowing how it’s set up, what parts it comes with — and any additional items you might need. Before you start, though, you’ll want to read your multicooker’s manual. Each one is different, but there are a number of parts every model should have.

1. An Instant Pot and its parts. Different models will vary, but will generally have these components.

**Outer Body:** This contains the brain of the machine, with a display panel and various buttons for setting the functions. The outer body is what heats up when you turn the machine on. The inner pot sits in the cooker’s outer body. Never put food directly in the outer body if the inner pot isn’t there.

**Lid:**The lid covers the pot, keeping in steam. It needs to be locked into place before the pressure cooking function can be turned on. Some multicookers have detachable lids, and others have lids that are secured to the body of the pot on a hinge.

**Pressure Valve:**This metal valve indicates when the cooker is pressurized and when it is not. It will pop up when the cooker reaches pressure, and drop down when the pressure is released. You may not be able to see the valve pop up or down if it’s hidden under a plastic cover, which is sometimes the case depending on the model of your machine.

**Steam Valve:**Found on the lid, this valve allows the pot to build pressure or to release it. It has a sealing (locked) position and a venting (open) position. When using the pressure cooking function, the valve must be in the sealing position, or the pressure won’t build. A common mistake for new multicooker users is not properly sealing the vent. When using the slow cooking function, it must be in the venting position.

**Condensation Collector:**This plastic cup clips onto the outer body of the pot, catching any condensation released during slow cooking. You don’t need to use it during pressure cooking as the steam is contained in the machine.

**Inner Pot:**A stainless steel or nonstick pot, this is where the food cooks. It should be removed for cleaning.

**Sealing Ring:**This silicone gasket surrounds the lid and helps seal steam into the pot. Sealing rings can absorb the odor of strongly scented foods, like garlic, ginger and onions, during the cooking process. Some people like to buy extra sealing rings to use solely for delicate dishes, such as custards or plain rice. Always wash the sealing rings after use.

**Steamer Rack or Basket:**This sits in the inner pot and keeps food raised above the liquid when you don’t want it submerged.

#### ACCESSORIES

These items aren’t necessary for using your multicooker, but they are helpful: **aluminum foil** for covering pans and making slings for lifting soufflé dishes and cake pans out of the pot;**a 6- or 7-inch springform cake pan**, for cheesecakes and other cakes; **steamer baskets and racks**; **a nonstick insert**, for making rice with tahdig (a crisp, golden rice dish) and other potentially sticky dishes; and **a glass lid**, for seeing the progress of our food when slow cooking.

## What to Cook

Certain ingredients and preparations shine in a multicooker, allowing the machine to show off its strengths. Here are several that work well, with tips to help you start cooking. (Take note: No matter what you’re making, never load the cooker more than two-thirds full.) That said, when you’re just getting to know your multicooker, it’s best to follow a recipe at least once before going your own way.

#### CHICKEN

You’ll want to look for chicken dishes where the crisp skin isn’t part of the appeal. **Chicken steamed over an aromatic liquid, braised dishes, stews and soups, curries and barbecue chicken are all examples of dishes that work well.**

**Avoid whole, skin-on chickens.**Even if you brown the skin in advance, it will become flaccid and unappealing after cooking in a moist environment. It’s hard to cook a whole chicken evenly, because the white meat and dark meat cook at different rates. (For perfect, succulent roast chicken, our [roast chicken guide](https://cooking.nytimes.com/guides/11-how-to-roast-chicken) can help.)

For the most evenly cooked poultry, use all either dark or white meat — or, if slow cooking, be prepared to pull the white meat out of the pot before the dark meat. (This is harder to do using the pressure cooking setting.)

#### BEEF, LAMB, PORK AND OTHER MEATS

Whether you choose to slow cook or pressure cook, **the multicooker is wonderful for braised meats, especially tougher cuts,** which soften into something velvety and tender.

Keep in mind that larger chunks of meat take longer to cook than the same weight of smaller pieces. (A five-pound whole brisket takes longer than if you cut that brisket up into three or four pieces.)

**Meats benefit from an initial browning before the liquid is added to the pot.**This caramelizes them, adding depth of flavor and helping to enrich the sauce. You can brown the meat either directly in the cooker, or if it’s easier, in a skillet on the stove.

## What Not to Cook

Just because you can cook almost anything in a multicooker doesn’t mean you should. Here are some foods best left to other cooking methods.

1. **Crunchy, Browned Food:**Any place you’d want to have crunch or crispness, like the delectable fried chicken above ([our guide](https://cooking.nytimes.com/guides/25-how-to-make-fried-chicken) can help you with that) – unless you plan to broil or fry after cooking in the pot. For example, you can cook pork ribs in the pot until they’re falling apart tender, then broil them to crisp the edges.

**Quick Sautéed Food:**Anything that you can sauté in a pan on the stovetop in under 15 minutes (small pieces of meat like cutlets, delicate vegetables and fruits, certain egg dishes, pasta) will do better on the stove – particularly if you are looking for browning or caramelization. You also won’t save any time, even if you’re using the pressure cooking setting. By the time you bring everything up to pressure, allow for the cooking time and then release the pressure, it will probably take at least 15 minutes. So if you can do it faster and better on the stove, you might as well.

**Rare Steaks and Other Meats:**Save these for the grill, a cast-iron pan on the stove top, or the broiler.

**Fish and Seafood:**Because they can go from done to overdone in a matter of seconds, most fish and seafood do better using methods other than the pressure setting. **You can get a great result from pressure cooking, but your margin of error is pretty small.** Always follow the recipe exactly for the first time when cooking fish, or err on the side of less time. Generally, low pressure is sufficient, rather than using high pressure. Slow cooking, on the other hand, can work really well with fish and seafood, especially for seafood stews, braises, and steamed mussels and other bivalves.

**Pasta:**You can cook pasta in the multicooker, but it’s not nearly as intuitive or easy as boiling it on the stove. Pasta casseroles and lasagnas can work, but they will not brown on top unless you transfer them to the oven, and the sauces will not condense and deepen in flavor.

**Cakes and Other Pastries:**Most cakes taste better, and will rise better when baked in the oven. This is because the multicooker steams rather than bakes them. **The notable exceptions are cheesecake, delicate custards and puddings.** They cook well in the multicooker’s moist environment, without the need to set up a Bain-Marie as you would in an oven. When cooking under pressure, use low pressure for custards and puddings to ensure the mixture doesn’t curdle. Hardier cheesecakes can stand up to high pressure. When using the slow cooker function, keep an eye on the water level so it doesn’t evaporate before the custard is set. It can take a while.

## Convert Your Favorite Recipes

Conventional recipes can also be adapted for the multicooker. It’s not exact, but you can get good results by following these guidelines.

1. **For Pressure Cooking:**Cut the liquid by at least half or even three-quarters. You won’t have any of the evaporation happening in the pot. **A very rough estimate is to plan on about a third of the standard cooking time for meats, vegetables and grains**, with beans taking a quarter of the standard cook time.

**For Slow Cooking: Decrease the liquid by a third.** You don’t get as much evaporation in a slow cooker as you do in the oven. **Double or quadruple the cooking time,**depending on if you’re using the high or low setting.

**For Both Methods:**If you end up with a thin sauce, **open the cooker and use the sauté function**to allow some of the liquid to evaporate.