

Using your new microwave

If you're one of those lucky people who received a microwave oven for Christmas and now are wondering how to use it, then read on. Microwave ovens are a fantastic asset for every cook and almost all food preparation is faster and easier.

The microwaves that are made by your oven are: very short radio waves about 5 inches long, travel in straight lines at over 100,000 feet a second, travel only 10 to 15 feet before losing power, and penetrate food from all directions to a depth of 1/4 to 1 1/2 inches depending on the density of the food. Friction between molecules vibrating over 2 billion times a second produces heat in food but does not cause any chemical change in your food.

Like conventional ovens, microwave ovens differ in their rate and evenness of cooking. It is important for you to know the operating wattage of your oven for this will affect the cooking time and power level that you choose. To get the best usage from your oven, operate it on an outlet that will not compete for power with another major appliance.

Your microwave came with a cookbook filled with recipes just right with cooking times and power levels suited for your oven. Some general guidelines I have found helpful as I use my microwave include the following:

1) Always underestimate your cooking time when trying a new recipe. You can always add extra time, but you can't take time away from an overcooked product.

2) When doubling the food volume to be cooked, (such as another baked potato) only add 1/2 to 3/4 additional time. Doubling your time will certainly overcook your food.

3) If you find that some cooking occurs around the edges of foods when defrosting, change the power level to the 1st or 2nd level. This is especially helpful with defrosting frozen meats such as hamburger.

4) Carry-over cooking which is the standing time of a dish after coming out of the oven is included in most recipes. If you want to minimize the amount of carry-over cooking, uncover the product and stir it. If you want to maximize it, keep the dish covered for several minutes. Carry-over cooking can either finish off a dish to perfection or ruin it by overcooking.

5) It takes practice to know what needs to be covered and what kind of cover to use. If you want to hold in moisture or prevent splattering, or absorb moisture, you should use a cover. Plastic wraps & glass lids hold in moisture the best. Wax paper is fine for short cooking times (2-3 minutes) and is good for preventing splattering. Paper towels will absorb excess moisture and work fine when a crispier product is desired. Always leave a small vent hole when using plastic wrap. This prevents pressure from building up and splitting the plastic down the middle.

6) The size & shape of a cooking dish affect the way foods cook, such as:

a) The shallower the dish of food the shorter the cooking time.

b) Round shapes microwave more evenly than square or rectangular ones because more energy penetrates corners and causes overcooking.

c) Ring-shaped dishes cook food more even because energy penetrates food from the center as well as the sides.

d) Casserole dishes with straight sides cook more even because the depth of food is kept uniform.

Cooking in a microwave oven can be an exciting adventure that the whole family can get in on - from popping corn to making elaborate candies or fancy meat entrees.

The North Carolina Department of Agriculture invites you to try these recipes which can be made with agricultural products grown right here in our own great state. Happy New Year and good luck with your "microwaving."

HAM BOATS

- 1 baking potato
- 2 tablespoons milk
- 2 tablespoons dairy sour cream
- 1/2 cup fully cooked ham strips, 2 by 1/4-inch
- 1 tablespoon chopped green onion
- 3/4 teaspoons dry mustard
- 2 tablespoons shredded Cheddar cheese

Pierce potato with fork 2 to 3 times. Place in oven on paper towel. Microwave at High 3 to 5 minutes, or until soft to the touch, turning over after half the time. Wrap in foil or place under inverted bowl; let stand 5 minutes.

Slice potato in half lengthwise. Scoop out center. Set shells aside. Mash potato center with milk and sour cream. Mix in ham, green onion and mustard. Spoon into potato shells. Sprinkle 1 tablespoon cheese on each. Reduce power 50 percent (medium). Microwave 3 to 4 minutes, or until cheese melts and potato is heated. Serves 1.

HEARTY SAUSAGE AND RICE

- 1 lb. bulk sausage
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 1 green pepper, chopped
- 2 cups cooked rice
- 1 can (10 1/2 oz.) chicken with rice soup
- 1 can (8 3/4 oz.) corn, drained
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 teaspoon pepper

Crumble sausage into 2-quart casserole. Add onion and green pepper. Cover. Microwave at High 4 1/2 to 7 1/2, or until sausage is set and vegetables are tender, stirring once. Drain.

Stir in remaining ingredients. Cover. Microwave at High 6 1/2 to 9 minutes, or until heated through (140 F to 150 F), stirring once. Serves 4 to 6.

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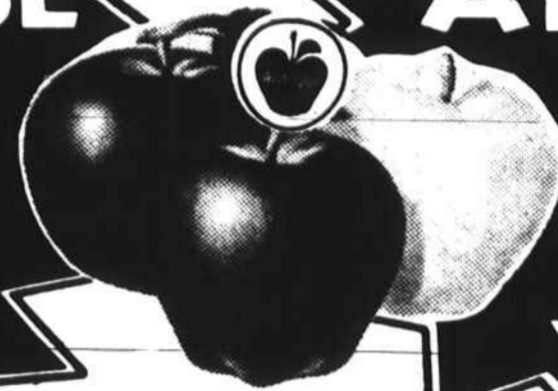
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Condensation can cause a problem on wooden sills

Have you noticed condensation inside your windows?

This water can cause a problem if it collects on wooden sills for several seasons, say extension housing specialists at North Carolina State University.

A humidifier may be used to reduce humidity to the recommended level of 30-40 percent for the winter months. The bathroom and kitchen should also be well-ventilated.

Storm windows also reduce this condensation, because they allow the interior glass to stay warmer. But condensation

may still occur on the inside of the storm window or in between the two windows. That is why all storm windows should have weep holes at the bottom. If your storm windows do not have these weep holes which allow the moisture to escape, drill a couple of quarter-inch holes outdoors at the base of the window.

If the condensation appears between the storm windows, there is an air leak. If the water is collecting on the outside window, check for air leaks from inside the house. Use weather stripping to seal off any leaks, extension specialists recommended.

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