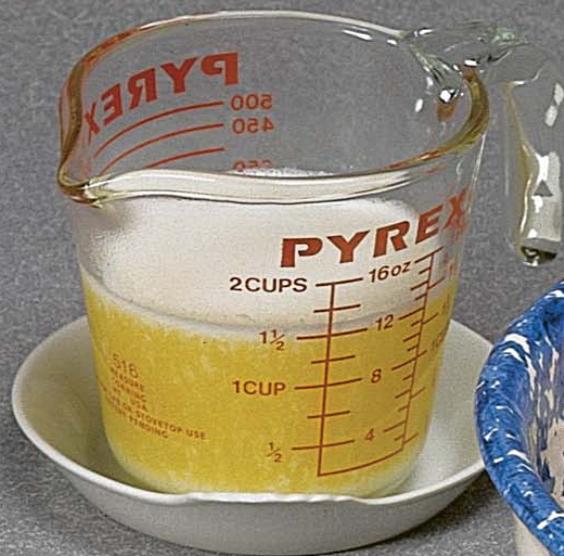


Prepping in the Microwave

Make small tasks a snap



BY JUDY RUSIGNUOLO

Sweat aromatic vegetables in the microwave instead of a skillet before adding them to stuffing, soups, or stews. Onions and garlic lose their bite after a couple of minutes in the microwave, and carrots and celery become tender and flavorful.

When asked about the prep tools I use most frequently in my kitchen, things like a food processor, a sturdy mixer, or a good set of knives immediately come to mind. It wasn't until a recent long day in my kitchen that I realized that the single tool I use the most is one that often goes unnoticed—the microwave oven. I won't say the microwave does everything well, because clearly it doesn't. The tasks I like to do in the microwave are generally those that are smaller parts of bigger processes, things that the microwave can do in a fraction of the time it would take using conventional appliances. Another benefit of the microwave is that most times the dish you use is easier to clean than the pot or skillet you would have used on the stovetop.

Prepping in the microwave does take some get-

ting used to. It's a very fast way of doing things, and so it requires your total attention and involvement in the process. Even though the tasks seem simple, they test your cooking skills. Because of the quick rate of cooking, you must constantly evaluate progress, tend foods to ensure evenness of cooking, and make decisions about when foods have reached their proper doneness. This probably sounds like more trouble than it really is. The fact is, while a watchful eye is necessary, each task on average takes no more than a few minutes to do.

You'll need to become familiar with the way your microwave oven performs. The size of your oven (compact, mid-size, full-size), its wattage (anywhere from 450 to 1,000W for noncommercial ovens), and the way in which the microwaves are distributed will

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determine its cooking efficiency. Cooking times do vary from one machine to another, but when you use your microwave every day, you get in tune with how quickly it cooks.

Microwaves are attracted to certain foods— Without going into a long technical explanation of how microwaves work, it's critical to know that some foods absorb microwave energy more efficiently than others—namely, fats and sugars. Because of this, foods with a high sugar or fat content (or both) will generally cook very quickly in your microwave. On the other hand, water and other liquids don't heat up any faster in the microwave than they do on the stovetop.

COLD OR LUMPY FOODS SOFTEN QUICKLY

One of the great things a microwave oven can do is to soften foods quickly. For example, a simple thing like softening cream cheese can take an hour or more if you were to leave it on the counter to come to room temperature. And putting it in a very low oven to speed the process can easily lead to disaster, even under the most watchful eye. Using the microwave, this task can be done in just a minute or two.

Besides softening cream cheese, the microwave is great for softening butter or peanut butter to make them more spreadable, for restoring honey that has crystallized, and for softening brown sugar that has become too hard to break apart.

Use a lower power setting, such as defrost (30%) or medium (50%), when softening foods so that the temperature of the food changes gradually. You don't want an unexpected meltdown. Foods will soften more quickly and evenly if you cut them into small pieces. I usually cut a stick of butter or a bar of cream cheese into eight pieces, and spread them out in a shallow bowl. I microwave them on defrost (30%) for one minute, check the texture by pressing with a spoon, and then continue microwaving for fifteen seconds at a time until they're softened to the consistency I want. As with all microwave cooking, the length of time it takes has much to do with the amount of food and the size of the pieces, and frequent checking is necessary to get the exact texture you want. It's important to check butter frequently, because with just a few seconds too many, it will begin to melt.

FATS MELT IN MINUTES

Because microwaves are attracted to fats and sugars, melting things like butter and chocolate is quite easy and quick. As with softening, cutting the food into small pieces will speed up the melting process. I usually melt ingredients on high power because there's a little more margin of safety than there is when softening food.

One stick (half cup) of butter melts in a minute to a minute and a half, with one stop along the way



Clarify butter quickly without the risk of burning it. Simply melt the butter in the microwave, remove it, and then wait for the milk solids to separate from the butterfat. Skim any foam from the surface and pour off the butterfat, leaving behind the milky liquid.

Tips for small tasks in the microwave

- Use glass, ceramic, or plastic containers that are approved for microwave use. Microwaves can't penetrate metal cookware—you'll get a show of fireworks rather than cooked food.
- Contrary to popular belief, cookware can become very hot in the microwave. Always use potholders when checking or removing food.
- Microwaveable glass measuring cups are very handy—they're available in a variety of sizes (from one- to eight-cup capacities), have handles for easy use, and can serve as mixing bowls when stirring in additional ingredients.
- Microwaveable glass pie plates work well for foods that need to be spread out for even cooking, such as nuts or shredded coconut.
- Ingredients right out of the refrigerator or freezer will take longer to cook than those at room temperature.
- I usually set the microwave timer for the total cooking time when I'm able to stand by and tend foods. This is more convenient than resetting the timer after each short check, but the key here is that you must stay nearby to check progress.—J.R.



Stir to prevent burning when you toast coconut, nuts, or sesame seeds in the microwave (left). Otherwise, hot spots in the microwave will overcook some parts before others have begun to brown (right).

to give it a stir. Once butter is melted, don't continue to heat it because the nonfat liquids in it will cause it to bubble up and spatter.

Clarifying butter—Making clarified butter by removing the milk solids and liquids from the butterfat is a natural for the microwave. After melting the butter (a stick of butter in a small measuring cup works well), let it stand for five minutes for the butter to separate. Skim off the foam from the top, and then carefully pour the clear butterfat into another container. Discard the milky liquid that remains on the bottom.

Melting chocolate—The microwave melts chocolate perfectly in a couple of minutes, much faster than in a double boiler, and there's no risk of water or steam splashing into the chocolate and making it seize. If I plan to add the chocolate to a recipe, I usually melt it in a custard cup. If I'm going to add other ingredients to the chocolate, I use a large bowl.

The only tricky part about melting chocolate in a microwave is that you can't tell how much it has melted by peering through the window. Chocolate retains its shape—even when melted—until it's stirred. I microwave one to two ounces of chocolate on high (100%) for one minute, take it out and stir it, and then put it back in for fifteen seconds at a time. It's important to use small increments toward the end of the melting process because chocolate can burn, even in the microwave. When melting larger amounts of chocolate, you'll need to add more time. Chopping the chocolate helps it melt more evenly.

TOAST NUTS WITHOUT HEATING UP AN OVEN
I used to hesitate before turning on a conventional oven just to toast a handful of nuts, but now I toast

them in the microwave whenever I need them. You can toast most nuts, including walnuts, pecans, almonds, and pine nuts, in a microwave. By varying the amount of cooking time, you can toast them lightly if you're using them in a dish that requires further cooking, or toast them longer to bring out their full flavor, which is especially good when using toasted nuts as a garnish.

To toast about a cup of nuts, spread them out in a single layer in a shallow bowl or a glass pie plate. Microwave on high (100%) for three to four minutes, or until they're as brown as you like them. Be sure to give them a stir every minute so that they toast evenly. You can also toast sesame seeds and coconut this way; just leave them in for less time.

SAUTEING OFF THE STOVE

"Sauté" may not be the correct term to describe cooking in the microwave, but it does describe the result I want to get when I cook aromatic vegetables—like onions, garlic, or shallots—in a little oil or butter until they're softened, tender, full of flavor, and ready to add to my simmering pot of soup or stew on the stove. A cup of coarsely chopped onion tossed in a tablespoon of oil or butter takes four to five minutes on high (100%) to become tender, while a small amount of minced shallots or garlic cooks in a minute to a minute and a half. It's a good idea to give them a stir at least once so that they cook evenly.

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