

## Holiday tips for dementia caregivers during COVID-19

The holidays are often filled with sharing, laughter and memories. But they can also bring stress, disappointment, sadness — and due to the COVID-19 pandemic — heightened risk for spreading the virus, especially for older adults who tend to have underlying health conditions. A person living with Alzheimer's may feel a special sense of loss during the holidays because of the changes he or she has experienced. At the same time, caregivers may feel overwhelmed by maintaining traditions while providing care and adhering to safety precautions.

The safest option is to avoid in-person holiday gatherings with people outside of your household — but there are other ways to stay socially connected. Below are ideas for how to safely engage with family and friends during the holidays.

- **Vaccines**

Vaccines — both the COVID-19 vaccine and the seasonal flu vaccine — are an important step in protecting the health and safety of people with Alzheimer's disease or other dementia, as well as their caregivers. The Alzheimer's Association strongly encourages their use, especially as friends and family look forward to gathering for the holidays.

Now that COVID-19 vaccines are widely available to the general public, most older adults have been vaccinated. But vaccinated individuals can still be infected with COVID-19, particularly if they are exposed to people who haven't been vaccinated. Wearing masks, getting tested, physical distancing and other safety measures must continue so that visits can be as safe as possible for everyone involved, especially for our most vulnerable loved ones.

For more information on the COVID-19 vaccines, visit [alz.org/alzheimers-dementia/coronavirus-covid-19-vaccine](https://alz.org/alzheimers-dementia/coronavirus-covid-19-vaccine).

- **Adjust expectations**

- The stress of caregiving responsibilities layered with holiday traditions can take a toll. The current COVID-19 crisis is creating challenges that can feel overwhelming for many families impacted by dementia. It's more important than ever to take care of your physical, mental and emotional well-being.
- Arrange for a group discussion via telephone, video call or email for family and friends to discuss holiday celebrations in advance. Make sure that everyone understands your caregiving situation, the safety

precautions you're taking to help keep your loved one healthy and has realistic expectations about what you can and cannot do.

- A conversation in advance is also a great time to let others know about any changes they might see in the person living with dementia.
  - Give yourself permission to do only what you can reasonably and safely manage — this likely means much smaller and more casual gatherings, if at all. No one should expect you to maintain every holiday tradition or event, especially during a pandemic.
  - Consider celebrating earlier in the day so you can work around the evening confusion (sundowning) if it sometimes affects the person living with Alzheimer's.
- **Celebrate while physical distancing.**
    - Continue holiday traditions by dropping off favorite baked goods or a care package in a way that avoids close contact, such as leaving the special delivery at the person's front door.
    - Schedule your own "holiday parade" and ask family members and friends to drive by the older adult's home with homemade signs or other festive decorations.
    - Plan an outdoor visit with hot chocolate and blankets.
    - Go outside for a walk in the neighborhood to enjoy holiday lights and decorations.
    - Create and send holiday cards.
    - Remember to maintain at least 6 feet of distance between yourself and any person who is not a member of your household, wear a mask and wash your hands frequently.
  - **Connect through technology.**
    - Use video call software like Zoom or Skype to gather virtually. Since it can be difficult to have conversations with larger groups over video, adding some structure to the call can help. Play a trivia game, sing carols or share pictures from past gatherings.
    - Use video to capture and digitally send special moments, such as children opening gifts.
    - Plan a video call to cook or bake a special recipe together.
    - Record and send a "video holiday card" that includes personalized messages.
    - Schedule a time to watch a favorite holiday movie together from separate homes. Text or video chat while you watch.
    - If your loved one struggles with technology, ask a primary caregiver — or staff in an assisted living facility — if they can help facilitate a

video call. If that's not possible, connecting with a simple phone call goes a long way toward feeling together on the holidays.

- Cross talk or simultaneous conversations can be challenging for people living with dementia, so consider this when planning.

### **Take extra precautions for in-person gatherings**

If you choose to include older adults in an in-person holiday gathering, it is critical to weigh the risks to their health. Even when precautions are taken, close contact with anyone outside of your household increases the risk of spreading COVID-19. Please consider the following if you choose to include older adults in a face-to-face gathering:

- If the person with dementia lives in a care community, be sure to check its visitation policies.
- If you are unvaccinated, consider getting tested prior to visiting.
- Limit the number of people in attendance, especially if there are individuals who are not vaccinated.
- Do not attend or host a gathering if you have been (or think you have been) exposed to COVID-19.
- Ask unvaccinated attendees to avoid or strictly limit contact with others for 14 days prior to your gathering.
- Host the event outside, if possible.
- Ask attendees to wash or sanitize their hands regularly, wear masks when not eating and drinking, and maintain six feet of distance between one another.
- Shorten the duration of the event or limit the amount of time older adults will be in attendance.
- Avoid hugging, handshakes and close contact of any kind.
- Encourage guests to bring food and drinks for themselves and members of their household only. If food will be served to all attendees, avoid buffet and family-style meals in which many people handle serving dishes and utensils. Instead, designate one person to plate dinner. Also, consider creative seating options that will help guests practice physical distancing.
- Consider the levels of COVID-19 transmission in the community where the event is being held. Also, keep in mind that travel increases the likelihood of spreading or contracting COVID-19, so consider this when inviting guests who live far away or in areas with high rates of transmission.

### **Familiarize others with the situation**

The holidays are full of emotions, so it can help to let friends and family members know what to expect. If the person is in the early stages of Alzheimer's, relatives and friends might not notice any changes. But the person living with dementia may have trouble following conversation or tend to repeat him- or herself. Family can help with

communication by being patient, not interrupting or correcting, and giving the person time to finish his or her thoughts. If the person is in the middle or late stages of Alzheimer's, there may be significant changes in cognitive abilities since the last conversation. These changes can be hard to accept. Make sure friends and family understand that changes in behavior and memory are caused by the disease and not the person.

You may find this easier to share changes in a letter or email that can be sent to multiple recipients. Here is an example:

"I'm writing to let you know how things are going at our house. While we're looking forward to the holidays, we thought it might be helpful if you understood our current situation in advance.

You may notice that \_\_\_ has changed since you last saw him/her. Among the changes you may notice are \_\_\_. I've enclosed a picture so you know how \_\_\_ looks now. Because \_\_\_ sometimes has problems remembering and thinking clearly, his/her behavior is a little unpredictable.

Please understand that \_\_\_ may not remember who you are and may confuse you with someone else. Please don't feel offended by this. He/she appreciates your time with us and so do we. Please treat \_\_\_ as you would any person. A warm smile will be appreciated more than you know.

We would ask that you call when you're nearby so we can prepare for your arrival. With your help and support, we can create a holiday memory that we'll all treasure."

For more ideas on how to let others know about changes in your loved one, join ALZConnected® ([alzconnected.org](http://alzconnected.org)), our free online support community where caregivers like you share tips on what has worked for them.

### **Involve the person living with dementia**

Involve the person in safe, manageable holiday preparation activities that he or she enjoys:

- Ask him or her to help you prepare food, wrap packages, help decorate or set the table. (Avoid using candies, artificial fruits and vegetables as decorations because a person living with dementia might confuse them with real food. Blinking lights may also confuse the person.)
- When making holiday plans, consider what will be most comfortable and enjoyable for the person living with dementia, while keeping safety in mind. Maintain the person's normal routine as much as possible, so that holiday preparations don't become disruptive or confusing.

- Focus on the things that bring happiness and let go of activities that seem overwhelming, stressful or too risky. Taking on too many tasks can wear on both of you.
- Build on traditions and memories and experiment with new, physically distanced traditions that might be less stressful or a better fit with your caregiving responsibilities, such as watching seasonal movies.

**Adapt gift giving**

- Ask people to send gifts in the mail rather than delivering them in person. Opening gifts over a video call like Zoom or Skype or even over a phone call can still feel very personal.
- Provide people with suggestions for useful and enjoyable gifts for the person, such as an identification bracelet or membership in a wandering response service. Or, suggest comfortable, easy-to-remove clothing; favorite music; photo albums of family and friends; or favorite treats.

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