



ALZHEIMER'S CAREGIVING

## Holiday Hints for Alzheimer's Caregivers

Holidays can be meaningful, enriching times for both the person with Alzheimer's disease and his or her family. Maintaining or adapting family rituals and traditions helps all family members feel a sense of belonging and family identity. For a person with Alzheimer's, this link with a familiar past is reassuring.

However, celebrations, special events, or holidays, which may include other people, can cause confusion and anxiety for a person with Alzheimer's. He or she may find some situations easier and more pleasurable than others. The tips below can help you balance busy holiday activities with everyday care for a person with Alzheimer's disease.



### Holiday Hints During COVID-19

Caregivers may face new challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Older adults, particularly those with underlying chronic conditions, are more likely to become seriously ill from COVID-19. Adults with dementia may have trouble following personal protective measures, like wearing a mask or physical distancing. In addition, you may need to avoid visits with family and friends due to physical distancing guidelines.

This holiday season, you can find ways to safely celebrate the holidays that are important to you. Consider other ways to connect, like a virtual family reunion, video call singalong, or a phone call. If someone does visit you in-person, be sure to follow CDC's guidelines for physical distancing. Find more information in CDC's guidance for caregivers of people living with dementia.

### Finding the Right Balance

Many caregivers have mixed feelings about holidays. They may have happy memories of the past, but they also may worry about the extra demands that holidays make on their time and energy.

Here are some ways to balance doing many holiday-related activities while taking care of your own needs and those of the person with Alzheimer's disease:

- Celebrate holidays that are important to you. Include the person with Alzheimer's as much as possible.

- Set your own limits, and be clear about them with others. You do not have to live up to the expectations of friends or relatives. Your situation is different now.
- Involve the person with Alzheimer's in simple holiday preparations, or have him or her observe your preparations. Observing you will familiarize him or her with the upcoming festivities. Participating with you may give the person the pleasure of helping and the fun of anticipating and reminiscing.
- Consider simplifying your holidays around the home. For example, rather than cooking an elaborate dinner, consider a smaller dinner with close family. Instead of elaborate decorations, consider choosing a few select items.
- When health and safety provisions allow, encourage friends and family to visit even if it's difficult. During COVID-19, follow CDC's physical distancing guidelines for all visits. Limit the number of visitors at any one time. Plan visits when the person usually is at his or her best. Virtual visits through video or phone calls are also a great way to connect over the holiday season.
- Prepare quiet distractions to use, such as looking at pictures or going for a walk, if the person with Alzheimer's becomes upset or overstimulated.
- Make sure there is a quiet space where the person can rest and have time to recharge.
- Try to avoid situations that may confuse or frustrate the person with Alzheimer's, such as changes in routine and strange places.
- Try to stay away from noise, loud conversations, loud music, lighting that is too bright or too dark, and having too much rich food or drink (especially alcohol).
- Find time for holiday activities you like to do. For example, go for a walk in the neighborhood and look at holiday decorations, or bake holiday cookies.
- If you receive invitations to events that the person with Alzheimer's cannot attend, consider going yourself. Ask a friend or family member to spend time with the person while you're out.

## Holiday Home Safety Tips

Holiday decorations, such as Christmas trees, lights, or menorahs, should be secured so that they do not fall or catch on fire. Anything flammable should be monitored at all times, and extra precautions should be taken so that lights or anything breakable are fixed firmly, correctly, and out of the way of those with Alzheimer's disease. Candles should never be lit without supervision. When not in use, they should be put away. Also, try to avoid clutter, especially in walkways, during the holidays. For more home safety tips, visit [Home Safety and Alzheimer's Disease](#).

## Preparing Guests

Explain to guests that the person with Alzheimer's disease does not always remember what is expected and acceptable. Give examples of unusual behaviors that may take place such as incontinence, eating food with fingers, wandering, or hallucinations.

If this is the first visit since the person with Alzheimer's became severely impaired, inform people ahead of time what they can expect. The memory-impaired person may not remember guests' names or relationships but can still enjoy

their company.

- Explain that memory loss is the result of the disease and is not intentional.
- Stress that the meaningfulness of the moment together matters more than what the person remembers.

For more information, visit [Helping Family and Friends Understand Alzheimer's](#).

## Preparing the Person with Alzheimer's

Here are some tips to help the person with Alzheimer's disease get ready for visitors:

- Begin showing a photo of the guest to the person a week before arrival. Each day, explain who the visitor is while showing the photo.
- Arrange a phone call for the person with Alzheimer's and the visitor. The call gives the visitor an idea of what to expect and gives the person with Alzheimer's an opportunity to become familiar with the visitor.
- Keep the memory-impaired person's routine as close to normal as possible.
- During the hustle and bustle of the holiday season, guard against fatigue and find time for adequate rest.

Read about [this topic in Spanish](#). Lea sobre [este tema en español](#).

## For More Information About Holidays and Alzheimer's

### NIA Alzheimer's and related Dementias Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center

800-438-4380 (toll-free)

[adear@nia.nih.gov](mailto:adear@nia.nih.gov)

[www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers](http://www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers)

The NIA ADEAR Center offers information and free print publications about Alzheimer's and related dementias for families, caregivers, and health professionals. ADEAR Center staff answer telephone, email, and written requests and make referrals to local and national resources.

### Alzheimers.gov

[www.alzheimers.gov](http://www.alzheimers.gov)

Explore the Alzheimers.gov portal for information and resources on Alzheimer's and related dementias from across the federal government.

This content is provided by the NIH National Institute on Aging (NIA). NIA scientists and other experts review this content to ensure it is accurate and up to date.

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## Related Articles



## Holidays

The holidays are often filled with opportunities for togetherness, sharing, laughter and memories. But they can also bring stress, disappointment and sadness. 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 maintaining traditions while providing care.

In the early stage, a person living with Alzheimer's may experience minor changes. Some may withdraw and be less comfortable socializing, while others may relish seeing family and friends as before. The key is to check in with each other and discuss options. A simple "How are you doing?" or "How are you coping with everything?" may be appreciated. Plan the holidays together, focusing on the things that bring happiness and letting go of activities that seem overwhelming or stressful.

As the disease progresses into the middle and late stages, review your holiday plans to ensure they are still a good fit. Everyone's unique and finding a plan that works can involve trial and error. The following tips may help you make the holidays easier and happier occasions:

### Adjust expectations.

- Call a face-to-face meeting or arrange for a group discussion via telephone, video chat or email for family and friends to discuss holiday celebrations. Make sure that everyone understands your caregiving situation and has realistic expectations about what you can and cannot do. No one should expect you to maintain every holiday tradition or event.
- Give yourself permission to do only what you can reasonably manage. If you've always invited 15 to 20 people to your home, consider inviting five for a simpler meal. Think about having a potluck dinner, asking someone to order and bring dinner, or asking others to host.
- Familiarize others with your situation by writing a letter or email similar to the following:

*I'm writing to let you know how things are going at our house. We're looking forward to your visit, and we thought it might be helpful for you to understand our current situation before you arrive.*

*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 being with us and so do we. Please treat \_\_\_ as you would any person. A warm smile and a gentle touch on \_\_\_'s shoulder or hand 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*

**Involve the person living with Alzheimer's.**

- 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.)
- Maintain the person's normal routine as much as possible, so that holiday preparations don't become disruptive or confusing. Taking on too many tasks can wear on both of you.
- Build on traditions and memories. Your family member may find comfort in going caroling, but you may also experiment with new traditions that might be less stressful or a better fit with your caregiving responsibilities, such as watching seasonal movies.

**Adapt gift giving.**

- Provide people with suggestions for useful and enjoyable gifts for the person, such as an identification bracelet or membership in a wandering response service (contact the Alzheimer's Association 24/7 Helpline at 800.272.3900 for more information). Or, suggest comfortable, easy-to-remove clothing; favorite music; photo albums of family and friends; or favorite treats.
- Advise people not to give gifts such as dangerous tools or instruments, utensils, challenging board games, complicated electronic equipment or pets.
- Depending on his or her abilities and preferences, involve the person in gift giving. For example, someone who once enjoyed baking may enjoy helping to make cookies and pack them in tins or boxes. Or you may want to buy the gift so that the person can wrap it.
- If friends or family members ask you what you'd like for a gift, you may want to suggest a gift certificate or something that will help make things easier, like housecleaning; lawn, handyman or laundry services; restaurant gift cards; or even volunteer to visit with the person for an afternoon so you can have some time off.

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**Try to be flexible.**

- Celebrate over lunch or brunch, rather than an evening meal, so you can work around the evening confusion (sundowning) if it sometimes affects the person living with Alzheimer's.
- Consider serving nonalcoholic drinks and keeping the room bright.
- Prepare for post-holiday letdown. Arrange for in-home care so you can rest, enjoy a movie or have lunch with a friend, and reduce post-holiday stress and fatigue.

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## Healthy Lifestyle

# Caregivers

**Holidays can be challenging for families affected by Alzheimer's. Try these tips to make the holidays easier and enjoyable for everyone.**

By Mayo Clinic Staff

The holiday season can cause mixed feelings for a family affected by Alzheimer's disease or other dementia.

While typically a time for celebration, families may experience a sense of loss for the way things used to be. For caregivers, the holidays may create added work. You'll also have to consider the needs of the person with dementia during holiday decorating and gatherings.

By adjusting your expectations and modifying some traditions, you may find meaningful ways to celebrate holidays.

To create an appropriate environment during the holidays for the person with dementia:

- **Tone down decorations.** Avoid blinking lights or large decorative displays that can cause confusion. Avoid decorations that cause clutter or require you to rearrange a familiar room.
- **Avoid safety hazards.** Substitute electric candles for burning candles. If you light candles, don't leave them unattended. Avoid fragile decorations or decorations that could be mistaken for edible treats, such as artificial fruits. If you have a tree, secure it to a wall.
- **Play favorite music.** Familiar or favorite holiday music may be enjoyable. Adjust the volume to be relaxing and not distressing.

To help the person with dementia enjoy the holidays:

- **Prepare together.** Mix batter, decorate cookies, open holiday cards or make simple decorations. Focus on the task rather than the outcome.
- **Host a small gathering.** Aim to keep celebrations quiet and relaxed.
- **Avoid disruptions.** Plan a gathering at the best time of day for the person with dementia. Keep daily routines in place as much as possible.
- **Provide a quiet place.** If you are having guests over, provide a quiet place for the person with dementia to have time alone or to visit with one person at a time.
- **Plan meaningful activities.** You might read a favorite holiday story, look at photo albums, watch a favorite holiday movie or sing songs.
- **Keep outings brief.** If you'll be attending a holiday gathering, plan to be brief or be prepared to leave early if necessary. Make sure there is a place to rest or take a break.

If your family member lives in a nursing home or other care facility, try these ideas:

- **Celebrate in the most familiar setting.** Because a change in environment can cause distress, consider holding a small family celebration at the facility. You might participate in holiday activities planned for the residents.
- **Minimize visitor traffic.** Arrange for a few family members to drop in on different days. A large group may be overwhelming.

To help visitors prepare for holiday time with a person with dementia:

- **Provide an update.** Let guests know ahead of time about any changes in behavior or memory since their last visit. Providing a recent photo can help people prepare for changes in appearance.
- **Offer communication tips.** Suggest ways for guests to listen patiently, such as not criticizing repeated comments, not correcting errors and not interrupting.
- **Suggest activities.** Tell guests ahead of time what activities you have planned or suggest something they might bring, such as a photo album.

Self-care is crucial for caregivers during the holidays. To make the season enjoyable:

- **Pick and choose.** Focus on the holiday activities and traditions that are most important to you. Remember that you can't do it all.
- **Manage others' expectations.** Set realistic expectations for what you can contribute to family holiday celebrations.
- **Delegate.** Let family and friends help with cleaning, addressing cards and shopping for gifts.
- **Make time for yourself.** Ask a family member or friend to give you a break so that you can enjoy a holiday outing without caregiving responsibilities.

Simplifying celebrations, planning ahead and setting boundaries can help you minimize stress and create a pleasant holiday experience for you and the person with dementia.

## Show References

1. Holiday hints for Alzheimer's caregivers. National Institute on Aging. <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/holiday-hints-alzheimers-caregivers>. Accessed Nov. 16, 2018.
2. The holidays and Alzheimer's. Alzheimer's Association. <https://www.alz.org/help-support/resources/holidays>. Accessed Nov. 16, 2018.

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