

# Celebrating Holidays During the COVID-19 Pandemic



Health and Wellness

The holiday season typically involves travel, gatherings of family and friends, indoor religious services, and parties, all of which present new risks this year because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

How can you maintain the most important aspects of your holiday celebrations without putting yourself or vulnerable family members in danger from serious illness? The answers will be different for every family and every individual. This article offers some key factors to consider and some ideas for enjoying the holidays in different ways this year.

## Factors that Increase or Decrease the Risk from COVID-19 at In-Person Holiday Gatherings

Base your decisions around how to celebrate the holidays this year on the key factors that are known to increase or decrease the risk of catching or spreading the virus. These include:

- **The incidence of COVID-19 in the community.** Pay attention to the current levels of disease in the community where a holiday gathering is being considered and in the communities from which people may be traveling to attend your family's gathering.
- **The number of people who will be at the gathering.** The more people at the gathering, the greater the risk that one or more will be carrying the coronavirus. The number of people allowed to gather may also be limited by state or local health guidelines.
- **The behavior of people before and during the gathering.** If all attendees have been following safe virus-prevention practices in the weeks before the gathering (limiting contact with people outside of their households, social distancing and wearing masks when outside the home, frequent handwashing) and if all attendees continue to observe safe practices during the gathering, the risk of infection will be lower than if even one attendee is lax in observing these measures.
- **How people will travel to the gathering.** If any attendees will need to travel a distance by plane, train, or bus to the gathering, this will increase the risk of bringing the virus to the celebration.

- **Ventilation and air flow at the gathering location.** COVID-19 is known to spread through exhaled aerosols when people breathe, talk, sing, yell, sneeze, or cough. Small aerosols can remain suspended in still, indoor air for hours. Outdoor gatherings are safer than indoor gatherings, and indoor gatherings are safer with good ventilation, such as open windows or doors.
- **How long people will be together.** The longer the gathering, the greater the risk of virus transmission.

Do not host or attend an in-person holiday gathering if you or anyone in your household has been diagnosed with COVID-19, has symptoms of COVID-19, is waiting for COVID-19 viral test results, or has been exposed to someone with COVID-19 in the 14 days before you attend the gathering.

In-person holiday gatherings beyond the immediate household should not include anyone who is at higher risk of serious illness and death from COVID-19. This includes adults aged 65 and over and people of any age with existing heart, lung, or immune-system conditions. These at-risk individuals

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should limit in-person holiday celebrations to members of their immediate households and find safe ways to connect by phone or video with friends and extended family.

## Ways to Celebrate Holidays Safely During the COVID-19 Pandemic

People around the world have already had some experience with changing the ways they celebrate important holidays. Many key religious holidays have already been observed with virtual or carefully managed services and limited family gatherings. National holidays have been observed without parades or public gatherings. As the fall and winter holidays approach, the same kinds of changes will be needed to protect the health of the people you love while maintaining the joy, togetherness, and spiritual meaning you value so much in these celebrations. Here are some ways to celebrate the upcoming holidays to minimize the risk of COVID-19:

### Lowest Risk

- Limit in-person gatherings to people from your immediate household.
- Include other family members and friends by phone or video.
- Select key elements of your holiday traditions, and modify them to be safe during the pandemic:
  - Prepare traditional family recipes for family and friends who live nearby, and deliver them in a way that does not involve contact.
  - Make holiday cookies early, and mail them to people who won't be with you in person.
  - Share recipes ahead of time so virtual participants can prepare some of the same food at holiday meals.
  - Watch a holiday movie together using Netflix Party or another application.
  - Have a virtual cookie-decorating party.
  - Share pictures of your holiday decorations and activities.
- Think of new holiday traditions this year to make your celebrations meaningful and fun even if you can't all be together.

### Moderate Risk

- Limit in-person gatherings to people from your immediate household and a small group of people from other households.
- Include distant family members by phone or video to limit the risk of virus transmission during travel and the spread of COVID-19 between regions. If family members do travel from a distance, they should follow guidelines to minimize risk during travel and self-isolate for a period of time on arrival.
- Gather outdoors if the weather allows. If gathering indoors, increase ventilation by opening windows and doors, weather permitting.
- Ask that attendees avoid contact with people outside their households for two weeks before the gathering.
- Communicate expectations about safety guidelines to be followed during the gathering:
  - Maintain physical distancing.
  - Wear masks when in the company of people not in your household.
  - Wash hands frequently or use hand sanitizers.
  - Avoid handshakes, hugs, or fist bumps. -Sanitize door handles, bathroom surfaces and handles, and other surfaces after every use.
  - Don't share serving utensils — have one person serve everyone, or have each household group bring its own food and utensils and serve themselves separately.

### High-Risk Activities to Avoid

- Avoid activities such as
  - Large indoor gatherings with people from outside your household
  - Shopping in crowded stores just before or during the holidays
  - Attending crowded outdoor events

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