



PARENTS PACK

MONTHLY UPDATES ABOUT
VACCINES ACROSS THE LIFESPAN

COVID-19 AND THE HOLIDAYS: MAKING SPECIAL MEMORIES THIS SEASON

November 2020

COVID-19 has spread at family gatherings, so as you think about the holidays, it is important to plan with COVID-19 in mind. Being flexible and willing to pivot will be key.

Despite the unique situation in which we find ourselves, advance planning and alternative approaches to your typical plans can help.

Advance planning

While we have adapted to wearing masks, social distancing, and limiting our interactions with those outside of our “bubble,” some may be getting tired of these measures and longing for typical holiday plans. Unfortunately, since many holiday traditions involve activities that provide opportunities for the virus to spread, it will be important to consider how we can celebrate while keeping ourselves and those around us safe and healthy.

First, it is important to include everyone in the planning and decision-making process to ensure that they are not only comfortable with the plans but also willing to follow and adhere to them. Likewise, if disagreements arise, be sure not to create a situation in which other family members feel as though they need to choose sides. Heading into holiday planning with an understanding and acceptance of the fact that everyone is handling public health recommendations differently will help prevent family disagreements that remain long after the pandemic.

Some of the questions that will be important to consider this year include: Who is at higher risk of complications from COVID-19? What travel and lodging is involved, and for whom? And, how can gatherings be both safe and fun?

Who is at higher risk of complications from COVID-19?

People with chronic conditions of the lungs and heart, those who are obese, older individuals, and certain racial and ethnic groups are at increased risk of being hospitalized, or even dying, if they are infected with COVID-19. So, when planning, you will want to consider:

- Does your group include vulnerable people? Not only is it important to think about who might be more vulnerable, but also how they will feel if you invite them to an event. Will they feel obligated to attend? Will they feel comfortable attending? Does it make more sense to cancel the event?
- Are there ways to alter the event to decrease the chance for exposure? Commonly practiced public health measures can also help, so encourage mask wearing, handwashing, use of hand sanitizer and social distancing. Other options could include limiting the size of the gathering, decreasing its length, planning an outdoor event (if possible), or hosting a virtual event.
- How do your invitations read? If you move forward with a gathering, make sure that invitations or pre-event communications include information about changes to typical plans, expectations for behavior, and messages that make it OK for those who wish to opt out to feel comfortable saying so. It is important that everyone respects the decisions of others, whether they decide to participate in this year's festivities or not.

It has been a tough year for everyone, so leaning into empathy and understanding, regardless of personal opinions, will be important.

What travel and lodging is involved, and for whom?

Travel: Traveling is often part of the holiday season, but traveling is likely to look different this year:

- Who is traveling? Are they at higher risk? Do they need special assistance?
- Can travelers quarantine at home for two weeks before their trip?
- Are there high levels of disease where people will be coming from or going to? Are there travel restrictions? Check your state's Department of Health website for travel advisories during planning and again right before traveling.
- How are they traveling? Planes, buses, trains, and cars all have their own considerations.
 - *Planes:* Those travelling by air should take precautions, like wearing masks, reducing touch points, carrying hand sanitizers and wipes, and maintaining distance, while waiting in security lines or terminals, using airport facilities, boarding shuttles, and sitting on flights.
 - *Buses and trains:* Many of the same considerations described for air travel also apply to travel by bus and train.
 - *Cars:* While car travel offers fewer interactions with people, travelers should take precautions related to stops along the way. Be sure to pack hand sanitizers or wipes, and ensure that everyone uses them when returning to the car. If travelers are from different households, everyone should wear a mask and either open the windows or set the ventilation so that air is not recirculating inside the car.

Lodging: Guests who need to travel by car may need to stay at a hotel along the way. Others may typically stay at a nearby hotel or, this year, those who normally stay at your home may opt to do so. Considerations for those staying at a hotel include:

- How well does the hotel follow public health guidance? Find out if they:
 - Require everyone to wear a mask
 - Have signage and floor markers reminding guests to maintain social distancing
 - Offer mobile check-in and check-out and contactless digital keys
 - Follow occupancy limit and seating capacity guidelines
- What are their disinfection and cleaning procedures? Find out about:
 - Policies around cleaning frequently touched surfaces
 - Cleaning practices in high-traffic areas
 - Housekeeping services in guest rooms and related to interactions with guests

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Considerations when guests are staying in the same home:

When people are staying in your home, you may feel less comfortable implementing special precautions or asking them to follow rules that are not typical, but one family's experience this summer shows why it is important to set aside your discomfort:

Over the summer, 20 relatives from five households spent three weeks together. Fourteen of the 20 people stayed together in the house without practicing public health measures; the other six visited outside with social distancing on two separate occasions, both lasting several hours. One person, who had a known exposure but tested negative for COVID-19 before the trip, was actually infected. While none of the six who visited outside developed COVID-19, 11 of the remaining 13 people who stayed in the home ultimately developed COVID-19. One was hospitalized, and one visited an emergency department; eventually, all recovered.

While this group was lucky that everyone recovered, we don't have any way to know who will become severely ill. And, sadly, many families have stories that did not end as well. For these reasons, if people from different homes are staying together, some tips for keeping everyone safe include:

- Encourage frequent handwashing, and provide hand soap or sanitizer and paper towels throughout the home. Don't share towels.
- Encourage mask wearing when indoors, particularly if social distancing is not possible.
- Clean surfaces frequently. Likewise, frequently disinfect high-touch surfaces. If families are sharing the same bathroom, clean and disinfect faucets, sinks and counter surfaces after each use.
- Limit the number of people in the kitchen, so everyone can stay 6 feet apart. During meals, plan seating that will allow for social distancing. People who live together can sit closer to one another.
- Don't share dishes, utensils or drinking glasses, and wear gloves when handling or washing these items.
- Launder all items that overnight guests used during their stay, and treat them as if they are contaminated. For example, wear gloves, wash items in the highest temperature possible, and dry at the highest heat setting recommended for the fabric.

How can gatherings be both safe and fun?

It's important to be flexible and realize that some traditions will need to be changed while keeping the occasion special, fun and safe.

During the event

- Provide hand sanitizer, soap, and paper towels. Avoid sharing hand towels.
- Make mask wearing fun by holding a mask contest instead of an "ugly sweater" contest, but make sure that designs don't make masks less protective.
- Spread seating out, so that people can comfortably social distance, rather than having everyone sit around the table.
- Plan to celebrate outdoors, if possible.
- Ensure adequate ventilation if you're gathering indoors. Keep windows and doors open and ask guests to wear their masks, unless they are eating.
- Avoid buffet-style meals; instead, have one or two people serving to decrease the chance for contamination of serving utensils. Or, order individually packaged meals from your favorite restaurant.
- Use disposable plates, cups and utensils, and encourage people to put their own used items in the trash. Make sure trash receptacles do not require touching a lid or opening a bag, so that many people are not touching the same surface.
- Put one person in charge of taking out the trash. Trash should be handled as if it is contaminated. Use disposable gloves and wash hands thoroughly after handling.

After the event

After everyone goes home, it will be important to know if anyone develops symptoms:

- Keep a list of all guests and remind them to report any COVID-19 symptoms that develop within 14 days of the gathering.
- Watch for symptoms among your own family and contact your healthcare provider if you believe someone might be infected. Alert guests if needed.

Virtual parties

Ultimately, you may decide that a virtual holiday party is the best way to ensure everyone's safety and comfort. If you decide to go this route, get creative:

- Choose a theme and have your guests "show up" with themed outfits.
- Plan what time you will eat and share the menu in advance, so everyone can dine together. Alternatively, treat everyone to a pre-ordered holiday meal, so the food can be delivered, and everyone can enjoy it together.
- Skip the meal and go right to dessert. Have guests bake and decorate cookies before the event and vote for the winners. Alternatively, send everyone a "cookie decorating" kit before the event and decorate together.
- Send gifts ahead of time, then open them during the party. Consider having attendees guess who sent them.
- Plan games, like a family history trivia game to see who remembers the most. Or, have a scavenger hunt. What about holiday bingo? Have everyone create boards and try their luck.
- Don't forget to hit the record button. Many video conferencing tools allow you to record your event without anyone needing to remember to "grab the camera."

Although this holiday season will be unlike any other, with advance planning, proper precautions and a little bit of creativity, your holidays can be both special and safe.

For more information about this newsletter or about vaccines in general, visit: www.vaccine.chop.edu/parents.