

Alzheimer's Association Regional Office Locations

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Denver, CO 80203
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Southwestern Colorado Office
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Northern Colorado Office
415 Peterson Street
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(970) 472-9798

Western Slope Office
2232 N. 7th Street, Unit B1
Grand Junction, CO 81501
(970) 256-1274

Northeastern Colorado Office
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(970) 392-9202

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A Caregiver's Guide for the Holidays



Alzheimer's Association of Colorado
Alz.org/co
800-272-3900



For most families, the holidays are filled with opportunities for togetherness, sharing laughter and memories. For people caring for the 72,000 Coloradoans with Alzheimer's disease, the holidays can also be filled with stress, disappointment and sadness. Because of the changes caused by Alzheimer's, families as well as the person with the disease, may feel a special sense of loss during the holidays. Caregivers may also feel overwhelmed by trying to maintain holiday traditions while providing care. In addition, there may be some hesitation about inviting family and friends over to share the holiday for fear they will be uncomfortable with the changes they see in the person with the disease.

Here are some suggestions for creating happy, contented and memorable holidays from people caring for someone in the early stages of Alzheimer's:

"Don't feel compelled to hang onto established family traditions if they are no longer practical," said Deb Wells, caregiver for her husband John. "Be willing to substitute or start a new activity that may become a tradition."

"One thing I did last year was to put gifts in bags instead of wrapping them. This saved me lots of time. I collect bags from year to year so this also recycles," stated Judy Lyons, caregiver for her husband Frank. Wells added, "By using bags John could help and feel part of the festivities."

Preparing Family and Friends:

Familiarize friends and family with changes in behavior and appearance that they may notice in your loved one. Give them tips for communicating and how to watch for increased anxiety or situations that might cause frustration and methods for helping calm your loved one down.



Communication Tips:

Communicating with a person affected by Alzheimer's disease requires patience and understanding. First and foremost, you must be a good listener.

When helping the person communicate:

- *Be patient and supportive*
- *Show your interest by maintaining eye contact*
- *Offer comfort and reassurance*
- *Give him/her time*
- *Avoid criticizing or correcting.*
- *Don't argue.* Arguing often only makes things worse
- *Offer a guess if he/she is struggling to find a word*
- *Focus on feelings, not facts*
- *Limit distractions*
- *Encourage him/her to communicate nonverbally*

Some additional ideas:

- *Be calm and supportive*
- *Focus on feelings, not facts*
- *Pay attention to tone of voice, yours and his/hers*
- *Identify yourself and address the person by name*
- *Speak slowly and clearly*
- *Use short, simple and familiar words*
- *Ask one question at a time*
- *Allow enough time for a response*
- *Use nonverbal communication such as pointing and touching*
- *Offer assistance as needed*
- *Don't talk about the person as if he/she was not there*
- *Have patience, flexibility and understanding*

Some material in "A Caregiver's Guide for the Holidays" was originally prepared by Judy Wunsch, Alzheimer's Association California Southland Chapter.



Keeping a Loved One Engaged and Anxiety Low:

- Invite children to visit only briefly or hold events that are adults only.
- Consider multiple small holiday meals with fewer people.
- Make nametags for **everyone** attending
- Ask adult children to rotate “buddying” up with the person struggling with memory loss. They can help monitor anxiety, overstimulation and tiredness as well as triggers for wandering, a risk if no one has been specifically tasked with staying close to the person with the disease.
- Bring a special dinner to the assisted living or care facility instead of taking the person with the disease out to a crowded restaurant.
- Have a quiet room so the person with dementia can relax or visit quietly with one or two people.

Holiday Decorations

- Remove all poisonous holiday decorations such as live poinsettias and mistletoe.
- Avoid accidental poisoning by substituting fake plants for the real thing or putting live plants far out of reach.
- Use flame-retardant artificial trees; if using cut trees, keep water reservoir full.
- Do not decorate with candles even if you never intend to light them.
- Maintain the normal paths and walkways as much as possible to avoid fall risks.

Quiet Time:

Plan for some quiet-time activities.

- Have a favorite DVD, CD, or record on hand
- Be prepared with some simple repetitive activity to maintain calmness: cracking nuts, folding napkins, or shelling peas
- Leave time to allow yourself and your loved one to take a walk
- Keep photo albums handy — go through them together

Here’s a sample note you might send or give to friends and family planning to visit over the holidays:

Dear Friends,

I’m writing to let you know how things are going at our house. While we’re looking forward to seeing you during the holidays, we thought it might be helpful if you understood our current situation before you arrive.

You may notice that “mom” has changed since you last saw her. Among the changes you may notice are increased confusion, repeating herself and asking the same question multiple times, a sensitivity to noise and the inability to join in the conversation like she used to (other examples). I’ve enclosed a picture as there have been some changes in her appearance as well.

Because “mom” has problems remembering and thinking clearly, her behavior is a little unpredictable.

I’d also like you to understand that “mom” may not remember your name or who you are and may confuse you with someone else. Please don’t feel offended. I know she will appreciate you being with us and it means a great deal to me as well. Please treat her as you always have. She’s still “mom”. A warm smile and gentle touch on her shoulder or hand will be appreciated more than you know.

Please give us a call before you stop by so we can prepare for your arrival. Caregiving is sometimes difficult and I’m doing the best I can but we have some good days and some bad and she would want to see you when she’s feeling her best. With your help, we can create a holiday memory that we’ll treasure.





Time Your Celebrations:

Celebrate early in the day to reduce the likelihood of “Sundowner Syndrome” (evening confusion)

- Have a holiday lunch rather than a dinner
- Serve sparkling apple juice or nonalcoholic beer or wine
- Keep the lights on to keep the room bright and the television off

Embracing New Traditions:

- Ask everyone to wear a name tag. Make a game out of it.
- Make sure everyone understands your caregiving situation and understands what works and what doesn't
- Run through celebrations and rituals of years gone by and determine which of these to continue and what new traditions may be initiated
- Set limits as to what you are able to do — and what is not possible for you and your loved one
- Consider holding a simpler gathering with fewer people
- Discuss having a potluck dinner or ask others to host the holiday at their home
- Look for ways to simplify shopping and gift-giving
- Ask other for help with those extra holiday tasks or errands

Gift Giving Ideas for the Caregiver

- Book or magazine subscription
- Gift certificate from a favorite store or day spa for a massage
- Something the household budget might not allow (massage, spa treatment, etc.)
- A supply of frozen and dated home-made meals
- Regular visits to the loved one in a long-term care facility
- Safety/assistive devices (e.g. exit alarms, hand-held shower, safety knobs)
- Your time (e.g., stay at the home so the caregiver can attend a support group meeting, a movie, a day spa)
- A coupon for coffee or a movie with a friend



Ideas for the Person with Alzheimer's

- Sneakers with Velcro or easy care clothing
- Tickets to a ball game, circus or concert (for those in the early stages of the disease)
- Music CDs
- Books with large pictures and few words
- Photo albums with pictures of children at different stages
- Modeling clay, watercolor paints
- Short car trips
- Simple and familiar games (early stage)
- A visit with your pet
- Your attention, company and hugs
- A Medic Alert + Alzheimer's Association Safe Return bracelet (www.alz.org/co)
- Enrollment in Comfort Zone
- Pass to a State or National Park
- Seasonal pass to the zoo or membership at a local museum

Items to help make dressing a little easier:

- Easy-to-remove clothing in comfortable, machine washable fabrics
- A jogging suit that pulls on or has Velcro fastenings
- A brightly colored cardigan sweater
- Slip-on shoes/slippers with Velcro closing
- Slipper socks with non-skid soles
- Leg warmers
- Clips to attach gloves to a coat
- Yak tracks or other nonslip shoe covers

