Navigating the Holidays and Alzheimer’s in the COVID-19 Era

With COVID-19 surging across the country, families are struggling with decisions about the upcoming holiday season. For families who have a loved one with Alzheimer’s or another dementia, these decisions are even harder. The Centers for Disease Control has stated that celebrating the holidays virtually or with members of your own household is the safest way to spend the holidays, and many local communities and residential care facilities have placed restrictions on in-person gatherings and visitation. With some advanced planning, many holiday traditions can be adapted so that the entire family, including loved ones with dementia, can still experience joy and a sense of togetherness.

To help families in their decision-making, a team of Alzheimer’s Association care consultants created this guide of tips and things to consider. Please call our 24/7 Helpline at 800.272.3900 for expert advice on your family’s unique situation.
**Start Now to Plan and Prepare for the Holidays**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discuss</th>
<th>Schedule a family conference call or Zoom to talk about upcoming holiday celebrations and visiting a loved one with dementia. If there is a family member serving as the primary caregiver for the loved one, be sure to include them in the discussion.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consult</td>
<td>Check the CDC website—cdc.gov—for COVID-19 guidelines on visits with individuals deemed higher risk/vulnerable.</td>
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<td>Consider</td>
<td>Think about what is best for the person with dementia. Be sure to keep expectations for the family, especially the primary caregiver, realistic.</td>
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<td>Decide</td>
<td>Reach a consensus among family members and make a decision for the holidays that everyone supports.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plan</td>
<td>Map out how you’ll celebrate the season and divide up responsibilities and assignments to make it happen.</td>
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Planning for virtual holiday celebrations

**Start right away** to create an enjoyable and meaningful holiday season by utilizing technology and Zoom/Facebook offerings to bring the family together.

**Find out the current device being used** by the person with the disease and their caregiver. It may be necessary for the family to consider purchasing a new, updated device to make viewing and participation in virtual activities more enjoyable. (Note this could be a joint family holiday gift for the loved one.)

**To ensure the person with the disease and their caregiver are able to participate in virtual events, arrange for training.** For instance, seniorplanet.org is a nonprofit that offers free videos and classes for seniors to learn technology.

**Identify one or two family members who can serve as the point persons** to coordinate the details and logistics of the various virtual offerings.

**Identify some contact-less options for celebrating the holidays** that will be meaningful and engaging for your loved one depending on his or her interests and abilities. Whatever you plan for your holiday, keep it simple and focus on the enjoyment of your loved one. Here are some ideas:

- Encourage family and friends to mail cards or photos
- Consider a drive-by parade
- Send a package of nostalgic holiday items
- Explore live stream options or pre-recorded videos for religious services, concerts or other holiday traditions
- Arrange for a phone call or videoconference with family and friends
- Pre-record messages from family and friends
- Cook favorite dishes together virtually in the days leading up to the holiday.
- Share the holiday meal by having the loved one and their caregiver join your family virtually.
- Organize a series of musical performances where children play a musical instrument or sing holiday songs.
- Schedule virtual baking sessions with your loved one during the holiday season.
Alzheimer’s disease and other dementia have a significant impact on communication abilities depending on the stage of the disease. Unfortunately, the face-to-face communication that usually works best for people with dementia will likely be limited, or perhaps impossible, this holiday season. The following tips can help to improve the experience of phone calls and video visits for you and your loved one:

**Communication Tips for Video Visits and Telephone Calls**

- **Consider the number of people involved in the phone call or visit.** If doing a group visit, have only one person speak at a time.

- **Make sure to introduce yourself.** Your loved one may not recognize your voice, or you may look different over video.

- **Speak slowly and give plenty of time for a response.** Ask one question at a time.

- **Let your loved one guide the conversation.**

- **Ensure that your loved one is wearing glasses and/or hearing aids if needed.**

- **Pay close attention** to your loved one’s body language and response, and adapt accordingly.

**Communicating about holiday plans**

- **Involve the loved one with dementia in the planning as much as possible and as appropriate to the stage of dementia.**

- **If the person has early stage dementia, inform them of changes early and repeat as necessary to help them adjust.**

- **If the person is in the middle to late stages, it may be more appropriate to address the new plans as they happen to avoid unnecessary confusion and stress.**

- **Keep in mind that for someone with advanced dementia, it is not necessary to talk about the pandemic. Instead, simply remind them that there is a flu bug going around. Therefore, masks will be worn, or some visitors will not be coming as in previous years.**
How to support a caregiver you won’t be seeing over the holidays

- **Be in touch** with the caregiver on a regular basis—at a time that works best for them and allows enough time to talk.

- **Talk with a caregiver about what they need** and how you can support them, and even help to develop a specific list. Share the list with others in the family.

- **Find out if there are specific tasks that can be taken off their plate**—gift buying, Christmas cards, etc.

- Depending on how far away you live, consider going to the home for a day and doing outside tasks—yard work, home repairs, putting up outside holiday decorations.

Gift ideas for a loved one with dementia and a family caregiver

1. **Make a holiday scrapbook** full of photos from holidays past and send that to the person with dementia prior to the holidays. This will help them to feel love and connected.

2. **Ask the caregiver for a gift list** for the person with dementia and arrange for the items to be sent to the house.

3. **Ask the caregiver for their own gift list** and then arrange to have gifts sent to the house.

4. **Create a family video montage.** Ask the family to record short clips and ask a tech-savvy family member to put it together.

5. **Encourage family/friends to give different gifts this year,** such as a weekly phone call for the entire year or a monthly card.

6. **Consider sending a monthly delivery of a home cooked or restaurant-purchased meal.** Look into gift cards for household or yard work services. Think ahead to what might be helpful the rest of the year.

7. **Have someone in the family design a family mask** and give one to all family members.

Making the holidays meaningful for a loved one in a long-term care community:

- Consult CDC guidelines (cdc.gov) and talk to facility staff about visitation policies.

- Ask if presents or food items can be sent to residents.

- Talk to facility staff about available support and equipment for video visits.

- Find out whether there are audio-visual capabilities in your loved one’s room or whether they have access to community equipment. Then consider sending them a mobile tablet and/or small CD player and also holiday song lists or classic movies. (Either digitally or on CD/DVD.)

- Inquire about the community’s plans for the holiday season, such as festive activities and decorations.

- Look into gift cards for household or yard work services. Think ahead to what might be helpful the rest of the year.

- Have someone in the family design a family mask and give one to all family members.