

The Christmas holidays

Christmas can be a particularly stressful time both for carers and for people with dementia. Many carers choose to spend Christmas with the person they care for, whether they live with them year round or invite them to stay over the Christmas period. Others have a loved one living in a care home. The following information is intended to help everyone concerned to have a relaxing and enjoyable break.

Please note: Although this information sheet has been written about the Christmas holidays, the information in it could equally be applied to any other religious festival or holiday.

Forward planning

If a person with dementia is visiting you over the Christmas period, there are many ways in which you can prepare for the visit and make things easier for both yourself and for your guest.

If the house is unfamiliar to your guest, or they become disoriented easily, putting labels on doors could help - for example, the bathroom, the kitchen, the person's own room. You could also label kitchen cupboards and drawers to help your guest find their way around more easily and feel more at home.

Think about any specialist equipment you might need, and buy or borrow it well in advance. For example, does the person need slip-proof mats or large-handled cutlery? Do you need to get extra supplies of incontinence pads?

Asking for help

Don't be afraid to ask your friends and neighbours for help. They may be happy to bring over a cooked meal for you, do a little bit of shopping, or sit with your guest for an hour or so while you have some time to yourself. Don't refuse help if somebody offers it - they may not think to offer again. If you have children, try to enlist their help - give them some tasks that they can be responsible for and explain what a difference their help makes.

Safety and security

The house may become quite noisy and busy over the Christmas season, making it easier for people to leave the house unnoticed. If you are worried about your guest leaving the house alone and getting lost, talk to other members of your family and decide on a plan of action. Can you remember to keep doors leading onto busy roads closed, or even locked? Try to enlist someone to accompany the person outdoors if they 'wander'.

Remember to keep spare keys in a safe place. Check the house in the evening to make sure that doors are locked and that no windows have been left open etc.

Check your house carefully for anything that might be dangerous. Consider the following points:

- If your guest is likely to get up at night, leave a light on in the hall when you go to bed and a night light in the bedroom.

- Make sure there is a light on in the bathroom or toilet so they can find their way at night.
- Tidy away or tape down any trailing flexes, remove rugs that a person could trip on, and remove clutter or objects lying on the floor. Make sure that nothing is ever left on the stairs.
- Lock away any medicines and dangerous substances such as bleach and paint.
- If your guest no longer seems to recognise danger make sure that potentially dangerous implements, such as sharp knives, are removed from the kitchen.
- If you have an open fire, make sure that a fixed fireguard is fitted.

Food and mealtimes

Food and eating plays a large part in the Christmas holiday, and you may feel anxious about how to fully involve your guest in this, especially if they have lost their appetite or they have difficulties eating. Here are some tips:

- Don't overload your guest's plate; although many people eat a lot over Christmas, a very full plate can be quite daunting for someone who has difficulties eating.
- If they eat very slowly, consider buying an insulated plate to keep their food warmer for longer, or heating it up in the microwave if it gets too cold.
- Check whether they are happy to eat with the rest of the family; they may prefer to eat in a different room, at a different time or on their own. If at all possible, be flexible and try to accommodate this.
- Try to be open minded about any unusual food combinations that your guest chooses. They may also enjoy their food with strong or spicy sauces or seasonings that seem strange to you - if this is the case, try not to object.

Emergencies

Make sure that you know which doctors and chemists are open over the Christmas period and ensure that you know where your nearest accident and emergency department is. Keep a list of emergency numbers in a safe place - for example, for the gas, electricity and water, and for the local police.

Social services have an emergency duty team operating during holidays to provide statutory care. In case of emergency or crisis you can call them; the local social services department will be listed in the phone book under the name of your local authority.

Medicine

Check whether your guest is taking any medication and ensure that they have enough to get through the Christmas period, as getting repeat prescriptions may be difficult at this time. If they usually live in a care home, talk to their care manager about this situation.

Emotional needs

The person with dementia

Your guest may find it unsettling to be in an unfamiliar house. Even if they live with you year-round, the atmosphere at Christmas may be very different from usual, and their routine may be disrupted. Each person with dementia will react to this differently, but some people may become more confused, upset or even aggressive. Christmas may also trigger emotional memories of the past, which could be difficult for them to deal with. Be prepared for changes in the person's behaviour and try not to be alarmed. Try to understand how they might be feeling and spend some time reassuring them and listening to them.

It may help if you can think of some activities and tasks that the person might enjoy doing in quieter moments. What do they enjoy doing in their day-to-day life? What might make them feel more at home? They may have some happy memories of bygone Christmases that you can reminisce about. Do you have any old photos you could look at together? The person might also enjoy puzzles, games, walking, or household tasks such as cleaning or cooking. Try to involve them in your own activities and reassure them that their help is valued.

Try to help your guest get a good night's sleep, as this may make a big difference to how well they cope during the day. Try not to allow them to take too many naps during the day, if possible, by encouraging activities and providing stimulation. Limit fluids in the evening and avoid stimulating drinks like tea and coffee. Try giving them a warm, milky drink at bedtime.

Your guest may also get some solace from spiritual activities. Think about their usual or past religious attitudes: would they like to go to church, or listen to church hymns? Talk to them about their views on the Christmas festival. Try to accommodate any particular wishes they may have if possible.

The carer

If you are caring for a guest with dementia over Christmas, you may become quite exhausted or stressed yourself. The following tips may help:

- Congratulate yourself for coping, and for being there for someone who needs you.
- Try to pace yourself and set realistic goals - if a task is not urgent, perhaps you can just let it go.
- Remember to take some time for yourself, even if it's just a few quiet minutes in the evening. You might also find it helpful to get out for a brief walk in the fresh air every now and then.
- If you are struggling and you need to talk to someone impartial, you can call the Samaritans. This is a charity providing confidential emotional support 24 hours a day, seven days a week for people who are in crisis or feel that they can no longer cope. See Useful contacts for details.
- The Alzheimer's Helpline will be open from 8.30am to 3pm on 23 December and then from 8.30am to 6pm on 28 December onwards. The Alzheimer's Society's online discussion forum, Talking Point, may also be a source of comfort and advice. Go to www.alzheimers.org.uk/TalkingPoint.
- Check your local TV, press and radio for details of local Christmas helplines. These can be very helpful if you need some advice or information about local services or if you are struggling and just need somebody to talk to.

The family

Stress and anxiety are common during the Christmas period and many families experience arguments or tension at this time. Try to avoid known triggers - for example, if you tend to argue about politics in your family, try to avoid the subject. It might help to plan a group activity after lunch so that everyone is busy and entertained. Perhaps you could all play cards together or watch a film.

Many people tend to drink more over Christmas and this can make arguments and accidents more likely. Although sociable drinking over Christmas is all part of the fun for many people, try to ensure that drinking stays within sensible limits.

It may be helpful to designate a room as a 'quiet room' if possible and agree not to watch television or listen to music in there. If anyone is feeling stressed or tense, there will then be somewhere quiet for them to sit and relax for a few moments.

When your friend or loved one is staying in a care home

You may have a family member or friend who will be staying in a care home over Christmas. This is a very difficult situation for many people. Try to remember that there is no right or wrong way to handle the situation. Some carers like to visit their relative and spend a large part of the day with them in the home; others are not able to do this, for a variety of reasons. Whatever your situation, try not to feel guilty and do your best to enjoy the holiday. If you need to talk about your feelings, you can call the Alzheimer's Helpline or you can join the Talking Point discussion forum to speak to people who may be in a similar situation.

Useful contacts

The Samaritans

Telephone: 08457 90 90 90 (24 hours, seven days a week)

Email: jo@samaritans.org

NHS Direct

Telephone: 0845 46 47

Email: <http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk/>

This 24-hour helpline can provide you with information about any kind of health problem you might have.

Further reading

We can provide a list of further reading on request. Please contact the librarian at the Alzheimer's Society national office on email library@alzheimers.org.uk.