



10 Tips for Happy Senior Holidays

The excitement of the holidays can bring out the best and worst in everyone, seniors included. The extra physical, mental, and emotional stress that holidays can bring can be especially taxing, especially on those with health problems. Staying connected to family and friends is especially important during the holidays when so much attention is paid in the media and in society at large to the importance of family and family gatherings. From fighting the "holiday blues" to making the most of family celebrations, these tips will help make your holidays – from Thanksgiving through New Years – the best they can be for everyone involved.

1. Cherish Old Memories. Taking a stroll down memory lane, looking at photo albums, watching home movies – these are all wonderful things to do at the holidays and can have several benefits for seniors and the family as a whole. First, seniors with Alzheimer's Disease or dementia can often recall older memories with great accuracy. They tend to enjoy talking about them, and that discussion can be quite calming as well. Second, sharing these memories across generations create deeper family bonds and allow younger members of the family to hear about family history (and lore!). Finally, many older people have strong and often intensely fond memories of holidays past and may miss the people with whom they used to spend time with, particularly deeply around the holidays. Talking about these memories and people and having friends and family acknowledge their sense of loss and can help alleviate the "holiday blues" as well as allow them to enjoy what the present holiday has to offer. Try neither to dismiss nor to dwell on such melancholy feelings.

2. Create New Memories. Make sure that, along with talking about the old times, there is an activity or event that the whole family can look forward to at this holiday. A special dessert – either a family favorite or a new recipe, a group game, a family photo, a short walk or drive to look at holiday decorations are all possible activities that seniors can look forward to when anticipating their holiday celebration.

3. Involve Everyone. Encourage seniors to do whatever daily tasks they can. A senior who can no longer put up the tree or bake the pies may still be able to cut out cookies or arrange flowers for the table. Losing the sense of "being in charge" can be difficult for many seniors. Be patient and allow them to give advice – even when it wasn't asked for. Some seniors may enjoy being able to finally take it easy and have people wait on them, but many have trouble with their new role of being cared for.

4. Avoid Over-Stimulation and Exhaustion. Many seniors tire easily, especially in the loud and active environment of the holidays. The over-stimulation of too many activities or too much noise or just too many people can overwhelm them and lead to exhaustion or plain old

bad moods and crankiness. Set aside time for a nap if that is what they are used to. Even arranging a quiet room or corner where they aren't in the middle of every activity can help alleviate the irritability that often comes with over-stimulation.

5. **Mealtime Savvy.** Along with scheduling nap time if necessary, try to schedule meals – or at least opportunities for eating – to fit the senior's regular meal times. When planning holiday menus, remember to include healthful, vegetable-laden dishes and some whole grains along with any heavy family favorites that will grace the table. Offering fresh fruit as well as cakes and cookie and pies at dessert is good for the whole family, and citrus fruit (like tangerines and Clementine oranges) is at its very best this time of year.

6. **Basic Household Respect.** If the holiday gathering is happening in the senior's home, be extra attentive and respectful of how they have things arranged. Do not move furniture around, since it can be disorienting to those with dementia and annoying or disrespectful to anyone. Ask for permission to move objects out of the way of children, for example, or to use special dishes or equipment.



7. **Fresh Air & Exercise.** If physically able and weather permitting, remember that nothing alleviates tension, anxiety, and irritability in almost anyone of any age quite like a little movement outdoors. A short walk or simply going outside to watch the kids play can brighten many gatherings. Bonus: exposure to sunlight can help fight seasonal affective disorder which can play into the "holiday blues."

8. **Avoid Accidents.** If the gathering is away from home for the senior, check to see that throw rugs are either taped down or picked up for the day; make sure bathrooms, stairs, and hallways are well-lit; clean up any clutter on the floor in rooms where the senior will be.

9. **Offer Alternatives to Alcohol.** The holidays are festive in many ways, and nogs and spirits are often part of the fun. Some seniors shouldn't drink at all, others can drink moderately. Excessive drinking really isn't great for anyone, however, and can lead to less respect, more animosity, inappropriate behavior or comments, and general incivility in anyone. Make sure plenty of non-alcoholic beverages are available and as accessible as alcoholic ones. Have water glasses full at the table and offer soft drinks regularly.

10. **Remember Other Seniors.** Reach out to other seniors you know during the holiday season. A visit or a phone call or card lets them know someone is thinking of them and helps them stay connected to their social network. Loneliness can be especially painful during the holidays, when others may seem so busy and happy if one is not. Let senior family members and friends know they are not alone.