



Top tips for a happier Christmas

Christmas can be a wonderful time but it can also be very stressful especially for carers. But with some pre-planning we can hopefully help you to make the festive period a little easier!

Preparation

Practicalities

If you become stressed, it is likely that the person you care for will be too and vice versa. Similarly, if the atmosphere in the house is calm and relaxed, your cared for person will have lower stress levels too. These tips will help you to manage the practicalities over the festive period⁽¹⁾:

- **Ensure you have sufficient medication:** this will reduce your stress levels by not worrying about ordering repeat prescriptions whilst GP surgeries and pharmacies are closed or are operating on reduced hours.
- **Shopping:** consider using online shopping or if you are shopping instore look at quieter or off-peak times. Some supermarkets run an 'autism hour' with less noise, which can be a quieter time to shop. Call stores to see if they are able to offer you any assistance if you are shopping instore.
- **More treats available at Christmas:** treats are nice but many can be very sugary! Find low sugar alternatives, for example: breadsticks, easy peel oranges, grapes, carrot sticks or hummus. People also tend to buy more alcohol at this time of year. Why not look at buying low or non-alcoholic alternatives which are now readily available.
- **Put up Christmas decorations gradually:** this will ensure it is not too overwhelming for the person you care for. Ensure they are not going to be knocked over easily (e.g. place cards on pegs rather than on shelves). If you are struggling ask for help from visiting friends and family for things which might be fiddly, such as with the lights or assembling an artificial tree.
- **Create a quiet room or space within your home:** if you have room make a space which is cosy with cushions and blankets yet 'Christmas free' with low sensory stimulation, to give those you care for time to relax when they become tired, or need time to themselves.
- **Think about what Christmas means to the person you care for:** do they want to be involved in a religious celebration and how can you enable them to take part? Visiting religious venues at different or quieter times may help or ask if they are offering online services for them to enjoy.
- **Involve the person you care for as much as you feel they can manage:** having printed 'From...' labels, to stick in Christmas cards instead of handwriting each one might help, or ask them to write one and scan it onto labels so they can stick them in

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themselves. Will they need help to buy presents and wrapping them? Consider using festive decorated bags rather than worrying about fiddly wrapping paper and sticky tape!

- **Buy prepared food or make it in advance and freeze it:** this will help you to not feel overwhelmed by having to cook it all from fresh on Christmas Day.
- **Take people up on their offers of help:** ask them to peel vegetables, or make or a Christmas cake or bring a dessert, so you don't have to worry providing one. People love to be asked to do something practical which can be enjoyed by everyone.
- **If you are visiting someone else's house:** pack everything you will need such as special cutlery, plates, cups, medicines, favourite food and drink. Ensure your hosts are understanding and won't make a fuss if the person you care for needs some quiet space or has specific ways or times of eating.
- **Going out?:** check for accessibility including parking and disabled spaces, quieter times to visit attractions, flexibility of menu if you are planning on eating there and availability of accessible toilets (consider buying a Radar key which opens over 10,000 UK disabled friendly toilets) etc.⁽³⁾

Managing expectations

- **Speak to friends and family in advance:** you might not be able to host your usual family parties, so work out a compromise. For example, having smaller and quieter gatherings; prepare people for the likelihood of the person you care for going to their quiet space and not to be offended if they do so!
- **Consider asking for help as gifts:** ask them to look after the person you care for to enable you to take a break to do something you enjoy.
- **Buy gadgets to make life easier:** ask for gifts which are going to be useful. People might be able to club together for larger items such as a tablet to help you with online shopping, browsing the internet or keeping in touch with them on online video calls⁽⁴⁾.
- **Manage your own expectations:** by making sure you have some nice things for yourself - even if the person you care for doesn't recognise the importance of the time or the day, you can still have some treats to ensure it is a special time for you as well.
- **Be flexible in your outlook:** you may have to change your plans – try not to be disappointed, look at each change as a positive opportunity to do something else.

On the day

- **Keep things simple and familiar:** including the usual daily routine. Be mindful of the usual eating preferences of the person you care for - ensure there are familiar and favourite things around.
- **Decant treats into small bowls:** to keep the temptation to over-indulge to a minimum.
- **Make time to go for a walk:** either by yourself, together, or with family/friends. Walking and fresh air is good exercise, lifts mood and improves sleep.
- **Help the person you care for to join in with conversations:** or by singing or enjoying games. Or take the initiative and start these at a level you know the person is comfortable with.

- **Watch for signs that the person you care for may become agitated:** they may want the toilet or may need to go to a quiet place. Help them to do this before they become too stressed.
- **Watch what the person you care for eats and drinks:** this will ensure they do not overindulge and ensure they are getting enough hydration. Alcohol might interfere with medication and cause complications. If the person has diabetes, the change of food might cause difficulties. Offer appropriate food and portions or distract the person with conversation or activities is easier than having to say, "don't you think you have had enough".

Having people over?

- **Explain your cared for symptoms to those visiting:** explain that even if the person cannot remember their names or their visit, emotionally it means a lot to them.
- **Ask people to do things together rather than just coming to talk:** For example, singing well known Christmas carols together or simple games such as pass the parcel or making mince pies.
- **Anticipate how excited everyone will be:** there may be more people, noise or background distractions than usual. Consider what the person you care for can cope with. Are they likely to be able to follow the conversation? Will guests be offended by anything they say or if they just leave the room? Speak to guests to ensure they are sensitive to the needs of the person you care for.
- **For people with dementia:** remind visitors to keep introducing themselves and not to keep on asking too many questions. Short chats about the weather, what the visitor has been doing, asking for stories about Christmas when the person was young or using objects to start a conversation (Christmas crackers; festive films or TV pages – whatever comes to hand).
- **Bring out photo albums or make a memory book:** enjoy reminiscing with everyone over happy memories from the past.

If the person you care for lives in a residential setting or their own home elsewhere

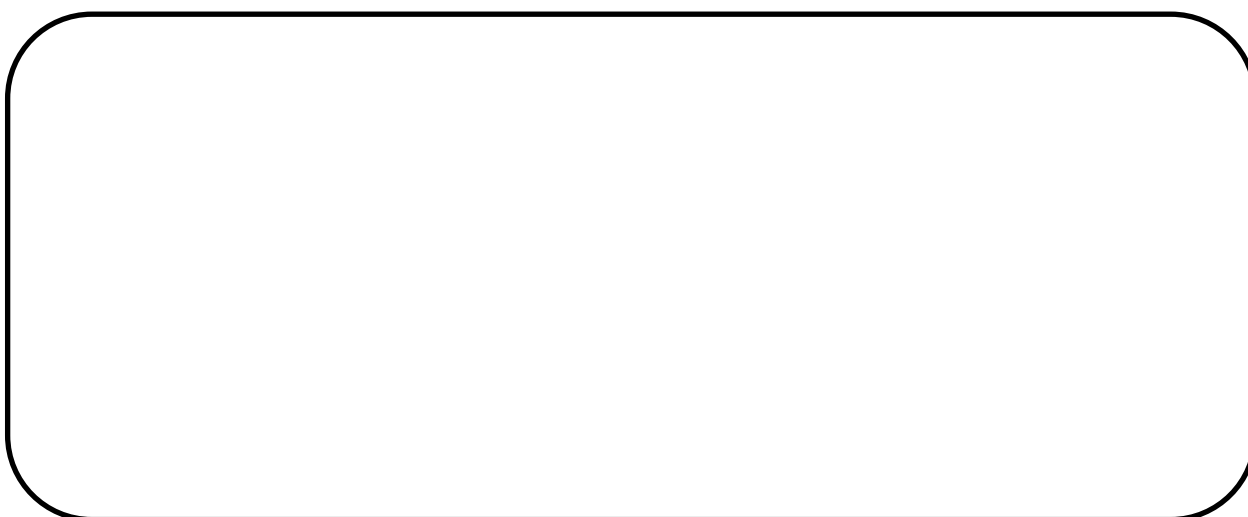
- **Check the individual residential setting's latest visiting guidance:** they may have different visiting times or events taking place over Christmas. Also check for the latest Covid-19 information⁽²⁾ including wearing masks or taking a lateral flow test before visiting. Check with other family members when they are planning to visit, so you can spread them out, to ensure it is not too overwhelming for those they are seeing.
- **For people living on their own:** check what they want to do. They may feel more secure staying in their own home. Can you do something in their home such as put up some decorations; make their Christmas lunch and bring it round on the day; make or buy some treats.
- **Check what support they will be getting over the Christmas period:** family who don't normally visit may be planning to see them, ensure you know who is coming and when. This is also an opportunity for you to take some time for yourself, plan a nice treat such as visiting other family or going for a walk with friends. Ensure the person you support has enough food, drink and medicine to cover the period.

Feeling isolated?

- **Ask trusted friends or family to sit with your cared for to enable you to have a break:** this will ensure you are able to catch up with family or friends who might only be visiting for Christmas. Ensure those who are sitting with your cared for have your mobile number if needed.
Ensure you take your Carers Alert Card with in case of an emergency if you are taken ill or into hospital whilst you are away. The card will be used to alert a 24-hour emergency call centre and they will ring your nominated contacts on your behalf if something happens to you. Visit our website for more information:
<https://devoncarers.org.uk/support/emergency-planning/alert-card/>
- **Look out for events that you can enjoy together:** take advantage of a change of scenery by visiting local events taking place over Christmas such as at National Trust properties, gift fairs, walks or even pantomimes.
- **Invite friends or family over for a short visit:** manage their expectations and ask them to pop over for a tea or coffee rather than promising lunch or dinner. Don't give yourself any more work to do than is necessary!
- **Catch up with people over online chat platforms such as Zoom or Facetime:** seeing them and their family online can be a great way to stop feeling isolated as you catch up with their and your latest news!

Whilst the Christmas you have may not be the one you would have preferred, with a little forward planning it can still be a very happy Christmas for you and the person you care for.

Use this space to make notes about your Christmas planning. Add ideas from other carers and things that have occurred to you.



References:

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3. Try sites such as Toilet map <https://www.toiletmap.org.uk/>Euan's guide <https://www.euansguide.com/>
4. See sites such as Live Better with Dementia: <https://dementia.livebetterwith.com/blogs/advice/top-gifts-for-someone-with-dementia>