

Holidays and cancer—tips for celebrating the season with less stress

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The holiday season is often a time for family get togethers, festivities and traditions. When one is being treated for cancer – or has a loved one undergoing treatment – it also can be a time of stress and anxiety.

Balancing medical needs with the desire to have a "normal" holiday can be challenging, but the Patient and Family Resource Center staff at the N.C. Cancer Hospital and UNC Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center have found that patients and their families who discuss and prioritize what traditions matter most are able to focus more on celebrating – and less on stressing over – the holidays.

"Sometimes the hardest thing to do is to have a simple conversation, but asking someone who is experiencing a serious illness about what [holiday traditions](#) they cherish is a great way to focus on what matters most to them – and it reduces a [family's](#) stress of trying to do it all," explains Loretta Muss, coordinator of the Patient and Family Advisory Council.

Muss offers the following tips for to patients and caregivers.

Advice for cancer patients

Simplify your holidays

- Pick one or two things that are most important to you and focus on those. All the rest can be done by family or friends or put

aside for this year.

- It is ok to ask for help.
- When people offer to help – and they will – give them an assignment, such as making meals, shopping for groceries, decorating the tree, or picking up wrapping paper.
- Know your limitations: The hardest thing to do may be realizing that you can't do it all.
- If you traditionally hosted the meal, allow someone else to cook the meal, suggest a potluck or, if you are feeling up to it, consider eating out as a treat.

Go digital

- Skip the long lines and the crowded mall parking lots by shopping for gifts online or through catalogues.
- Send e-cards, or skip cards all together this year.
- Make your hobby your gift. Your knitting, paintings or poems make for great personal gift that will be treasured. Additionally, it will alleviate overspending and not sabotage your time or energy.

Take time for yourself

- Rest, exercise, and reflect—it's all therapeutic.
- Talk with a loved one, a friend or a professional counselor if you are feeling low.
- Remember it's OK to show emotion. Tears can bring a sense of relief.
- Give yourself permission to do only as much as you can.
- If you are fatigued or tired, learn to say no.

Advice for family and friends

Help decorate

- Hang a wreath on the front door, string some up lights, offer to trim the tree.
- Help take some of the stress off the family by offering to take a Christmas card photo, write out cards, and shop for and wrap gifts.

Make meals

- Get a group together and set up a calendar to rotate meal deliveries.

Be supportive

- Be there to listen.
- Take cues on how the family wants to deal with the holidays.
- Understand that plans may change at the last minute based on how the patient feels.

Don't forget siblings

- Think about the siblings of pediatric [cancer patients](#), who can become the "undiagnosed patient." Shared activities like baking cookies together can help make their holiday brighter.

"One of the best things about the [holiday season](#) is that it can bring people together," says Muss. "Focusing on what our relationships mean to each other – rather than trying to carry out all of the traditions of seasons past – can make the holidays extra meaningful to patients and family members alike."

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