

Plan ahead to protect yourself, your family and your community from COVID-19 when you celebrate November and December holidays including, but not limited to: Día de Los Muertos; Diwali; Kwanzaa; Thanksgiving; Hanukkah; Christmas; and New Year's Eve.

**\*The Health Department strongly recommends NOT holding large family gatherings. Any type of celebration must include everyone wearing masks, distancing at least six feet from each other, regular hand sanitizing and disinfection of high-touch surfaces.**

## Travel Considerations

Reconsider travel during the holiday season and consider holding special remote gatherings or small gatherings at home. If traveling this holiday season, consider the mode of transportation (plane, car, bus, train), the dates you will be traveling, and your risk to COVID-19 exposure while traveling. Carry a small personal sanitizing kit that contains hand sanitizer, disinfecting wipes, and extra masks. Always wear a mask in public, wash your hands frequently, and practice social distancing when around others not from your household. Be aware of the risk level of your destination. Maryland State level metrics are available on the [Maryland Department of Health \(MDH\) website](#).

Driving your own vehicle will reduce your exposure to COVID-19. If you need to use commercial or public transportation, be aware of and try to avoid the busiest travel times. Consider traveling during non-peak times when there are likely to be fewer people. When possible, to accommodate travel and schedules, consider hosting celebrations on a different day, week, or month to allow for travel during less popular times.

Know when to delay or cancel your travel. Do not travel if you are sick with fever, cough, or other symptoms of COVID-19. Do not travel if you have recently tested positive for COVID-19, are waiting for results of a COVID-19 test, or have had close contact in the past 14 days with a person who has tested positive or has symptoms of COVID-19. If you have been asked to quarantine, delay your travel until after the full 14 days of quarantine, even if you don't have symptoms. If you test positive for COVID-19 while at your destination, isolate yourself from others for a minimum of 14 days or after a negative test, and delay your return.



## Overnight Guests

If you plan to have or be an overnight guest, the host and guests should communicate about what is expected ahead of time. Consider the health of those in your home and those visiting, including older adults and individuals with medical conditions that put them at higher risk of severe illness. Identify a room where an individual can isolate should they develop symptoms or test positive while visiting. Make sure everyone understands the importance of wearing a mask and social distancing. Ensure that soap and sanitizer are available, and clean frequently touched surfaces.

**Travel Awareness:** Review travel safety guidelines before travelling. Driving is a lower-risk travel option compared to flying. Both the host and guests should try to limit their activities and exposure opportunities during the two weeks before the visit; in other words, the best option is for the host and guests to quarantine for 14 days before seeing each other to minimize the risk of exposure. The host and guest should frequently self-check for any symptoms before, during, and after the visit. If staying at a hotel or apartment share, check beforehand on the safety precautions that are taken to protect you and your family. This should include wearing masks, social distancing, and regular cleaning and disinfection. Wear a mask in the lobby or other common areas and minimize use of areas that may lead to close contact such as lounging areas, fitness centers, and pools.

**Personal Interaction:** It is important to discuss your expectations with friends and family while celebrating the holidays during this COVID-19 pandemic. For example, suggest that handshakes and hugs be replaced with waves, verbal greetings, “air high-fives,” or “airhugs.” Communicate social distancing within the home and wearing a mask on a regular basis.

**Accommodations:** As a host, it is important to prepare sleeping areas and bathing accommodations. If necessary, discuss appropriate schedules for the use of commonly shared facilities. Offer additional masks, hand sanitizers, cleaning supplies, paper towels, and single-use items (e.g., individual soaps, toiletries, wipes, etc.). Encourage your guests to help maintain and disinfect high-use surfaces. Individual bathing towels, hand towels, or paper hand towels should be made available. Opening windows in the house slightly for fresh air can help with the quality of indoor ventilation.

## Holiday Shopping



The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has put shopping at crowded stores during the holiday season on its list of higher risk activities. Consider alternative ways to purchase gifts other than visiting stores in person, where possible. Stay home if you have tested positive or have symptoms of COVID-19, which can include fever or chills, cough, shortness of breath, or other symptoms.

Use social distancing (stay at least 6 feet away from others) if you choose to go shopping. Wear masks in public settings and when around people who don't live in your household, especially when other social distancing measures are difficult to maintain. Use hand sanitizer after leaving stores. Wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds when you get home.

**Lower Risk:** Consider shopping online. Many retailers have options for online shopping and in-person, contactless curbside or drive-up pick-up. If using in-person contactless pick-up, you and the retail personnel should wear masks.

**Medium Risk:** If you choose to shop in-person, wear your mask and maintain 6 feet of distance between you and others. Try to shop at off-peak times when there are fewer shoppers. Many retailers disinfect their carts or offer sanitizing wipes to allow you to wipe down the cart. Avoid touching your eyes, mouth, or nose with unwashed hands. Prepare a list to help avoid handling items you don't plan to purchase. Use touchless payment if possible or sanitize your hands after purchasing with cash or utilizing a credit or debit card keypad.

Bring hand sanitizer and handwipes with you. Be sure to sanitize upon entrance and exit from stores and wash your hands for 20 seconds upon your return home. Store a well-stocked “sanitizing kit” in your vehicle that includes hand sanitizer, wipes, disinfectant spray, mask, and paper towels.

**Higher Risk:** High-risk activities include in-person sale promotions or holiday activities that encourage large crowds and lining up for limited supply deals, which make social distancing a challenge. When shopping with a non-household member, make sure to wear a mask, including when driving. Santa Claus visits should include mask and social distancing to the extent possible. Individuals who have symptoms, have been exposed to someone with COVID-19 in the last 14 days, or are waiting for test results should not shop in-person.

## Holiday Meals

For many, the holidays include having family and friends together to share a meal. The following are tips to help with safer meal preparation and serving.



## General Considerations

- Limit the number of people for which social distancing is possible before, during, and after the meal.
- To the extent reasonably possible, consider taking advantage of outdoor gatherings as weather permits.
- Small indoor social gatherings should maintain 6 feet of distance, before, during, and after the meal
- Consider single-use disposable utensils and dishware for serving and eating meals.
- Encourage guests to wear a mask except to eat and to drink. Have an extra supply of masks, disinfectant wipes, hand sanitizers that contain at least 60% alcohol, and tissues on hand.
- Wash and disinfect guest areas before and after holiday gatherings.

## Meal Serving and Dining



In general, it is important to follow basic steps to help prevent foodborne illness – [Clean, Separate, Cook, and Chill](#). Those steps include washing your hands with soap and water for 20 seconds before and after preparing, serving, and eating food, which will also help prevent the spread of COVID-19. Currently, there is no evidence to suggest that handling food is associated with directly spreading COVID-19. It is possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object, including food, food packaging, or utensils that have the virus on it and then touching their mouth, nose, or eyes. However, this is not thought to be the main way the virus is spread.

- Encourage guests to bring food and drinks for themselves and for members of their own household only.
- Wear a mask while preparing or serving food to others who don't live in your household.
- Use single-use options or identify one person to serve sharable items, like salad dressings, food containers, plates and utensils, and condiments.
- Avoid any self-serve food or drink options, such as buffets or buffet-style potlucks, salad bars, and condiment or drink stations.

Maintain safe social distancing between households throughout the meal. Make sure everyone adheres to the 6 feet distancing, and that everyone is wearing a mask unless eating or drinking. For seating arrangements during meals, place households together, and maintain the 6 feet of distance between each household. Consider sharing your seating arrangements ahead of time so your guests know what to expect.

## Food Preparation and Clean Up

If part of the meal gathering includes family members preparing the meal, now is a time to get creative. Plan ahead and assign each household a traditional or favorite dish to prepare in advance. Food may be prepared in individual servings so as to avoid buffets. Think of ways to emphasize cultural and family traditions by connecting virtually over the plans for favorite family recipes.

- Wash and disinfect items that are reused.
- Limit the number of people that go in and out of areas where food is prepared or handled.
- Limit gathering in the kitchen and clean-up areas to same household members.

## Additional Considerations

- A more virtual celebration will allow close friends and relatives to celebrate with you.
- In-person events and activities should be held outdoors when possible, and participants should wear a mask and maintain 6 feet of distance. Smaller gatherings held outdoors where social distancing of 6 feet or more can be maintained will have less risk of COVID-19 transmission.
- Avoid the throng of people shopping for holiday meals by purchasing groceries online.
- When greeting friends and family, remain spaced at least 6 feet apart and minimize gestures that promote close contact. The more people an individual interacts with at a gathering and the longer that interaction lasts, the higher the potential risk of becoming infected with COVID-19 and COVID-19 spreading.
- When extinguishing candles used to celebrate a holiday, do so after everyone has left the room to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission.
- Delivering holiday foods, dessert, or décor at the door of extended family, elders, friends, or neighbors is another warm and safer way to celebrate a season of giving.
- Consider virtual caroling or reciting as an option. Provide a link to your virtual caroling to the people you want to sing to. In-person carolers should have a flu vaccination and bring hand sanitizer. Be sure everyone who comes to sing or recite is healthy. Do not go out if under quarantine or isolation. Do not go out while waiting for a COVID-19 test result.
- The safest option for in-person caroling or reading is one which is limited to members of your own household. Keep more than 6 feet from the people you are reciting or singing for. Remain outdoors while caroling and face away from other singers. If caroling with people from other households, be sure to wear a mask. Caroling and reciting is safest in small groups. Avoid in-person caroling or reciting if you have underlying health conditions.

**As a part of supporting good health during the holiday season, also get your annual flu vaccine to protect you and your family against the flu.**

