



**StrongSchoolsNC**

## **Celebrating Safely: Tips for the Holidays**

**Spread love, joy and cheer  
this holiday season –  
not COVID-19!**

**November 17, 2020**



NC DEPARTMENT OF  
**HEALTH AND  
HUMAN SERVICES**



Dear Families and Staff,

The fall and winter months will offer many of us a chance to rest and reconnect. This holiday season, in the midst of COVID, it will be more important than ever to consider the health and safety of not only ourselves, but of our friends, families and loved ones. And even though this means changes to long-standing holiday traditions for many of us, we must remember that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. With our continued dedication, by next Thanksgiving or sooner, this pandemic can be behind us.

But that will take everyone committing to a safe holiday season and taking action: Reduce the invite list. Space out your tables. Get a COVID test before the event. Or better yet, connect virtually.

I know that North Carolinians are creative and will find amazing ways to celebrate the holidays while still keeping our communities safe. Find a way that works for your family and know that your sacrifice is helping all of us.

We will continue to add to this collection of documents as we create more ways to support one-another across our state. Inside, you'll find best practices for holiday celebrations and private gatherings – if do you choose to come together, please use these documents as a resource and starting-place as you make your plans.

Don't forget the three W's:

- **Wear** a cloth face covering at all times when around other people you do not live with;
- **Wash** your hands with warm water and soap throughout the day and especially after coming in contact with other people; and
- **Wait** 6 feet apart from other people, maintaining at least 6-feet of distance between yourself and people you do not live with at all times.

I wish you all a happy and safe holiday season.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "E. Cuervo Tilson".

**Elizabeth Cuervo Tilson, MD, MPH**  
State Health Director and Chief Medical Officer  
NC Department of Health and Human Services

# Celebrating Thanksgiving Safely

If you decide to host or attend a holiday gathering, there are steps you can take to reduce your risk of spreading COVID-19.



## Practice the 3 Ws.

Wear a mask over your nose and mouth, wait 6 feet apart and wash your hands.



Consider getting tested for COVID-19 3 to 4 days prior to travel or attending family gatherings.



Limit your holiday travel and limit physical contact with people who do not live in your household.



Do not host or attend a gathering if you've been exposed to COVID-19 or have symptoms.



Seat people who live together at their own table and keep tables at least 6 feet apart from one another.



Higher risk guests should consider attending events virtually.



Use single-use options or identify one person to serve food, so that multiple people are not handling the items.



Keep the guest list small.



Clean and disinfect commonly-touched surfaces such as door handles and sink faucets.



Host your gathering outdoors. If that's not possible, make sure the room is well-ventilated by opening windows and doors.



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# Interim Guidance for the Thanksgiving Holiday (November 12, 2020)

Any scenario in which many people gather together poses a risk for COVID-19 transmission. This guidance is intended for people celebrating Thanksgiving outlining lower and moderate risk activities, as well as the higher risk activities that should be avoided to keep our communities safe.

While the holidays are a time when families and others gather together, you should be careful, particularly if gatherings include [individuals at higher risk](#) for severe illness (e.g., people over the age of 65 or who have underlying health conditions), and if there is an increasing or high number of cases in the community. If you have been recently diagnosed with COVID-19, have symptoms of COVID-19, or have been around a person with COVID-19, then do not host or participate in any in-person gatherings until you complete your isolation or quarantine period.

## Decreasing risk during the holidays:

- The best way to reduce your risk of viral transmission is to limit travel during the holidays and limit physical contact with people who do not live in your household.
- You should practice the 3W's and wear a face covering, keep 6 feet of social distancing, wash hands well. The 3Ws are even more important if you are getting together with someone at high risk of complications with COVID-19.

## Travel and gathering during the holidays:

If you are traveling and/or are planning to be with family members you do not live with during the holidays, there are steps you should take to reduce the risk of viral spread.

- You should consider having a screening COVID-19 test prior to travel or attending family gatherings. If you do have a screening test, consider the following important information:
  - A negative test only gives you information for that point in time. A negative test does not mean you will remain negative at any time point after that test.
  - Screening tests may miss some infections, particularly if done using rapid or "point of care" tests.
  - Even if you have a negative test, you should wear a mask, physically distance, avoid crowds and indoor crowded places, wash your hands frequently, monitor yourself for symptoms, and minimize contact with people at high risk of complications of COVID-19.

## If you are planning in-person holiday gatherings with people outside of your household:

### Before the event:

- You should consider asking all guests to strictly avoid contact with people outside of their households for 14 days before the gathering.
- Remind invited guests to stay home if they have been exposed to COVID-19 in the last 14 days or are showing COVID-19 symptoms.
- Clean and disinfect commonly touched surfaces (e.g., door handles, sink handles, bathroom surfaces) before guests come over and between uses.
- Keep the guest list small. When deciding how many people to invite to your gathering, consider the amount of space you have and the ability to maintain social distancing during the event.
- [Higher risk](#) guests should consider attending events virtually, so they can remain safely at home.
- If higher risk individuals do attend gatherings in person, ensure the 3Ws are practiced by all guests and limit the number of other guests in attendance as much as possible.
- *The day before the event*, all guests should screen for symptoms and stay home if they are not feeling well.

### During the Thanksgiving event:

- Host your gathering outdoors, when possible. If this is not feasible, make sure the room or space is well-ventilated by opening windows and doors to the extent that is safe and feasible based on the weather.
- Arrange tables and chairs to allow for social distancing between guest. People from the same household can be in groups together and do not need to be 6 feet apart – just 6 feet away from other groups or families.
- Practice the 3 Ws (Wear, Wait, Wash) during the event: Wear a face covering when not eating or drinking, Wait six feet apart from others, and Wash your hands regularly.
  - When guests need to remove a face covering to eat or drink, it is recommended they maintain 6 feet distance from people outside their household and put their face coverings back on after they are done eating or drinking.
- Limit people going in and out of the areas where food is being prepared or handled, such as in the kitchen or around the grill, if possible. Have one household approach the food serving area at a time to prevent congregating.
- Consider identifying one person to serve all food so that multiple people are not handling the serving utensils.
- Use single-use options or identify one person to serve sharable items, like salad dressings, food containers, and condiments, so that multiple people are not handling the items.

For more recommendations on how to safely attend a gathering, please follow the [NCDHHS Guidance for Private Social Gatherings](#) and [Guidelines for Get-Togethers](#) and only engage in the lower or moderate risk activities below.

#### Lower Risk Activities

- Having a [dinner](#) with only people who live in your household
- Preparing traditional family recipes for family and neighbors, especially those at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19, and delivering them in a way that doesn't involve contact with others
- Having a virtual dinner and sharing recipes with friends and family
- Watching sports events, parades, and movies from home

#### Moderate Risk Activities

- Having a small outdoor dinner with family and friends who live in your community
  - Follow NCDHHS's [Guidance for Private Gatherings](#)
- Attending a small outdoor sports event with safety precautions in place
- Attending a reverse parade, where spectators remain in their car and drive by floats or performers
- Visiting pumpkin patches or orchards where people use hand sanitizer before touching pumpkins or picking apples, wearing masks is encouraged or enforced, and people are able to maintain social distancing
  - Follow NCDHHS's [Guidance for Fall Events](#)

#### High Risk Activities

Avoid these higher risk activities to help prevent the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19:

- Attending large indoor gatherings with people from outside of your household or with people who do not practice the 3 W's (wear, wait, and wash)
- Attending parades- under the current [Executive Order](#) traditional parades are prohibited mass gatherings and limited in size
- Participating or being a spectator at a crowded race. Reminder that mass gatherings of groups
  - Remember that any gathering of more than 10 people indoors or 50 people outdoors are prohibited statewide

# Guidelines for Get-Togethers

Any time people get together there is an increased risk of COVID-19 transmission. Whether you're hosting or attending an event, here are tips for gathering safely and preventing the spread of the virus.



**Should you host or attend?** Do not if you're sick, have been diagnosed with or exposed to COVID-19, are waiting on COVID-19 test results, or have been told to isolate or quarantine by a health care professional or health department.



**Keep it distant.** Arrange space so people from different households can stay distant (at least 6 feet apart) and plan activities where social distancing can be maintained.



**Consider asking all guests to avoid contact with people outside of their households for 14 days before the event.**



**Eating and drinking?** Make sure you are 6 feet from others when you take off your mask.



**Keep it small.** No gathering should be larger than 10 people indoors and 50 people outdoors. Remember, the virus can be spread in smaller gatherings as well.



**Limit physical contact.** No handshaking or hugs. Wave or verbally greet each other instead.



**High-risk for COVID-19 complications?** Consider whether you should attend. Practice the 3Ws (Wear, Wait, Wash) at all times, but especially around people who are at high risk for COVID-19 complications.



**Wash your hands regularly or use hand sanitizer.**



**Stay outdoors if you can.** If indoors, open windows to increase ventilation with outside air as much as possible.



**Avoid self-serve food.** Limit the number of people handling or serving food. If serving food, have one person serve all food so that multiple people are not handling serving utensils. Encourage guests to bring their own food and drinks. Use disposable utensils and dishes.



**Wear a mask.** Everyone should wear one over their nose and mouth.



**Clean and disinfect commonly touched surfaces, such as door handles, sink handles, and bathroom surfaces.**



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# Interim Guidance for Private Social Gatherings (November 12, 2020)

**Guidelines for Private Social Gatherings:** Any scenario in which people gather together poses a risk for COVID-19 transmission. This includes private social gatherings in North Carolina such as cookouts or holiday gatherings. This guidance is intended for hosts and guests of private gatherings. The guidance below will help reduce the spread of COVID-19 in communities.

## The Basics

- Do not host or attend a gathering if:
  - You have been diagnosed with COVID-19
  - You are waiting for COVID-19 test results
  - You are experiencing [symptoms](#) of COVID-19
  - You have been told by the local health department to quarantine or isolate, or
  - You may have been exposed to someone with COVID-19
- No gathering should exceed current Mass Gathering Limits (10 people indoors and 50 people outdoors). Gatherings above these limits are currently prohibited statewide to slow the spread of COVID-19. However, the virus can be spread in smaller gatherings as well.
- When deciding how many people to invite to your gathering, consider the amount of space you have and the ability to maintain social distancing during the event.
- People at high risk of complications for COVID-19 (e.g., people over 65 years of age or with underlying chronic conditions) should avoid social gatherings. If they do attend, ensure the 3Ws are practiced.
- Consider hosting virtual events or having a virtual option for individuals that are higher risk to join safely from their home.
- Outdoor activities are preferred over indoor because it is easier to stay apart and there is more wind and air to help reduce the spread of the virus. However, even in outdoor settings, the more people that interact increases the risk of COVID-19 transmission.
- Practice the [3 Ws \(Wear, Wait, Wash\)](#) during the event: Wear a face covering, Wait six feet apart from others, and Wash your hands regularly.
- Anyone who develops COVID-19 within 48 hours after attending a gathering should notify other attendees as soon as possible regarding the potential exposure.

## Hosting a Social Gathering

### Remind guests to stay home if they are sick

- Remind invited guests to stay home if they have been exposed to COVID-19 in the last 14 days or are showing COVID-19 [symptoms](#).
- Consider keeping a list of guests who attended for potential future [contract tracing](#) needs. Encourage guests to download the [SlowCOVIDNC](#) Exposure Notification App.
- Tell your guests what steps you are taking to make sure your gathering is as safe as possible.



### **Encourage social distancing**

- Host your gathering outdoors, when possible. If this is not feasible, make sure the room or space is well-ventilated by opening windows and doors to the extent that is safe and feasible based on the weather.
- Arrange tables and chairs to allow for social distancing. People from the same household can be in groups together and do not need to be 6 feet apart – just 6 feet away from other groups or families.
- If planning activities for adults and/or kids, consider those where social distancing can be maintained, like sidewalk chalk art, corn hole, or frisbee.
- When guests arrive, minimize gestures that promote close contact. For example, rather than shaking hands or giving hugs, wave and verbally greet guests.
- Be mindful of serving alcohol, as guests are less likely to follow social distancing practices when drinking.

### **Wear cloth face coverings**

- Wear [cloth face coverings](#) when less than 6 feet apart from people or indoors.
- Consider providing cloth face coverings for guests or asking them to bring their own.

### **Clean hands often**

- Consider providing hand sanitizer in addition to clearly marked hand washing areas.
- [Wash your hands](#) for at least 20 seconds when entering and exiting social gatherings. If soap and water are not readily available, use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol.
- Make sure there is adequate soap or hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol, paper towels, and tissues available in the restrooms and encourage guests not to form a line at the door. Consider also providing cleaning supplies that allow guests to wipe down surfaces before they leave. Remove shared/communal hand towels.
- Remind guests to wash their hands before serving or eating food.
- Use single-use hand towels or paper towels for drying hands so guests do not share a towel.

### **Limit the number of people handling or serving food**

- Encourage guests to bring their own food and drinks.
- Limit people going in and out of the areas where food is being prepared or handled, such as in the kitchen or around the grill, if possible. Have one household approach the food serving area at a time to prevent congregating.
- If serving any food, consider identifying one person to serve all food so that multiple people are not handling the serving utensils.  
Use single-use options or identify one person to serve sharable items, like salad dressings, food containers, and condiments, so that multiple people are not handling the items.

### Limit contact with commonly touched surfaces or shared items

- [Clean and disinfect](#) commonly touched surfaces (e.g., door handles, sink handles, bathroom surfaces) before guests come over and between uses.
- Clean and disinfect any shared items between use when feasible.
- Use touchless garbage cans or pails or take lids off garbage cans to decrease the number of items touched.
- Use gloves when removing garbage bags or handling and disposing of trash. [Wash your hands](#) after removing gloves.
- If you choose to use any shared items that are reusable (e.g., seating covers, tablecloths, linen napkins), wash, clean, and sanitize them after the event.

## Attending a Social Gathering

### Prepare before you go

- Stay home if you have been diagnosed with COVID-19, if you are waiting for COVID-19 test results, are experiencing [symptoms](#) of COVID-19, been told by the local health department to quarantine or isolate, or think you may have been exposed to someone with COVID-19.
  - Invited guests who live with [those at higher risk](#) should also consider the potential risk to their loved ones or others who live in their household.
- Check with the host for updated information about any COVID-19 safety guidelines and if they [have steps in place](#) to prevent the spread of the virus.
- Prioritize attending outdoor activities over indoor activities and stay within your local area as much as possible.
- Bring supplies to help you and others stay healthy—for example, [cloth face coverings](#) (bring extra), hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol, and drinking water.
- If you are planning to attend in-person holiday gatherings with people outside of your household, consider strictly avoiding contact with people outside of your household for 14 days before the gathering.
- Get your flu shot prior to visiting friends and family during the flu season. Flu season begins in October and often peaks in the winter months, so the time to get your flu shot is now. Allow about 2 weeks for the flu shot to be active in protection.

### Use social distancing and limit physical contact

- Maintain a distance of at least 6 feet or more from people who do not live in your household. Be particularly mindful in areas where it may be harder to keep this distance, such as parking areas and routes of entry and exit.
- Select seating or determine where to stand based on the ability to keep 6 feet of space from people who do not live in your household, including if you will be eating or drinking.
- Arrive to the gatherings early or at off-peak times to avoid crowding and congested areas.
- Avoid forming a line at the restroom door or using the restroom at high traffic times, such as at the end of the gathering.
- Be mindful of drinking alcohol, as this can impact your ability to follow social distancing practices.

### **Wear cloth face coverings**

- Wear a [cloth face covering](#) when interacting with other people to minimize the risk of transmitting the virus.
  - Wearing cloth face coverings is most important when social distancing is difficult.
  - Cloth face coverings are strongly encouraged in settings where individuals might raise their voices, such as shouting, chanting, or singing. These are activities that increase the release of respiratory droplets and fine aerosols into the air and pose higher risk of COVID-19 transmission.
- If guests need to remove a face covering to eat or drink, it is recommended they maintain 6 feet distance from people outside their household and put their face coverings back on after they are done eating or drinking.

### **Limit contact with commonly touched surfaces or shared items**

- Use paper towels instead of a communal/shared hand towel. Use touchless garbage cans or pails.
- Use cashless payment options when possible.
- Avoid any self-serve food or drink options, such as buffets and condiment or drink stations.
- Use disposable food service items including utensils and dishes, if available, or consider bringing your own dishes and utensils.
- [Wash your hands](#) with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or use hand sanitizer immediately before eating food or after touching any common surfaces like door handles and toilets

### **Considerations for higher-risk individuals**

- People at high risk of complications for COVID-19 should avoid social gatherings.
  - High risk individuals include people over the age of 65 or have certain [medical conditions](#).
- Higher risk guests should consider attending events virtually, so they can remain safely at home.
- If higher risk individuals do attend gatherings in person, ensure the 3Ws are practiced by all guests and limit the number of other guests in attendance as much as possible.
- Consider asking all guests to strictly avoid contact with people outside of their households for 14 days before the gathering.