

# Spreading cheer, but no germs

## How to celebrate the holidays safely and happily at home

By **Kara Baskin** Globe Correspondent, Updated December 6, 2020, 12:00 a.m.

Is it possible to celebrate the holidays when your hand sanitizer has a higher alcohol content than your eggnog? Yes, with proper planning. Ahead, four experts — a virtual-cooking instructor, an art teacher, a party planner, and a critical-care physician — share advice.

### Staying healthy

***First things first: Safety*** Dr. Lakshman Swamy, an intensivist at Cambridge Health Alliance, urges people to take a harm-reduction perspective. There are certain hard-and-fast rules when it comes to winter celebrations now — avoiding large indoor gatherings, for instance — but navigating this virus mainly involves risk reduction. Unless you're cloistered in your home, nothing is 100 percent safe. So be realistic.

***Getting tested isn't a free pass*** Don't assume that just because you got tested, you're free to socialize at whim.

“People put too much faith in, ‘We all got tested; therefore, we should be safe to meet,’ ” Swamy warned. “That's not quite true for a number of reasons. All tests aren't equal, and even the best test isn't perfect.”

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Did you quarantine in between your test and the result? Did you test too soon after a recent exposure?

“Those cracks are bigger and bigger because of how much virus is in the community,” Swamy said.

***Reach an agreement.*** You’re not going to persuade grandma to wear a mask after her fourth mulled cider. Make sure everyone’s on the same page with safety protocols before meeting. Set ground rules: outdoors, masked, distanced.

“You don’t want to be the mask police, and I don’t know how effective it is. Get buy-in before anything happens,” Swamy said.

***Remember that risk exists on a spectrum.*** Very few activities are zero-risk in a pandemic. Stick with low-risk ones — walking outdoors, dining al fresco — but remember that fresh air isn’t a miracle cure. You still need to remain several feet apart and masked to be safe.

“The main vector of transmission is a droplet. If you’re within three feet with masks down” it’s still risky, Swamy said. Ideally, you’re more than six feet apart and masked except to eat or drink.

## **Food**

Speaking of which: food! Cooking is one of the best parts of gathering with friends and family, but communal dining is a germ-spreader. [Debbie Brosnan](#), a chef who runs virtual cooking classes at Arlington’s Effortless Kitchen, has ideas for far-flung feasts and

offers this advice for cooking together without getting together.

***Set the scene for maximum interaction.*** Place your iPad or laptop high above your counter. (She stacks hers on a flat Tupperware bin.) “Otherwise, people will be looking up your nose,” she said. Not appetizing.

***Keep it quick.*** Maximize your time and choose a dish that takes an hour or less, and make sure every participant has the ingredients set out in advance so everyone can focus.

***Tell stories.*** Choose a recipe that has meaning, such as Grandma’s favorite muffins. “Share memories around past holidays,” Brosnan said.

## **Crafts**

Artist [Alex Adamo](#) knows how devastating COVID-19 can be; she contracted the virus earlier this year. Now she teaches virtual art classes, helping friends and family gather safely and creatively.

“I think Zoom is our best friend. Come up with a craft ahead of time so everybody is able to have the same things on hand and to have that shared experience — it brings a tangible, physical element, and it gives you something to talk about and to feel proud of while creating a shared experience. Since we can’t cook together or set a table, we can do activities,” Adamo said.

Her specialty? Turning household items into keepsakes.

***Make salt-dough ornaments.*** Fill a bowl with two cups of white flour, a cup of salt, and one cup of warm water. For extra seasonality, add a pinch of nutmeg, clove, or another scent that drums up memories.

Mix until the dough has a Play-Doh-like consistency. Roll it out and cut shapes with cookie cutters. Pierce a hole with a knife and bake each shape at 170 degrees, an hour each side. Hang using garland.

**Design your own wrapping paper.** Got a few extra potatoes lying around from Thanksgiving? Slice one in half and carve a shape into the fleshy side using a knife. Dip the carved side into any type of paint and stamp it onto a piece of craft paper to create your own custom gift wrap.

Bonus: Kids love dunking the paint (though an adult should carve).

**Make a snowy owl.** Send your brood outside to collect pine cones. Clean out the dirt and bugs, then glue cotton balls to the layers to create an owl “skin.” Next, cut up scraps of old clothes or fabric to make wings and eyes. (This is a great way to dispose of a loved one’s ratty T-shirts.)

It’s a bonding activity for extended family who can then have “the same thing on their mantels, reflecting the same creative process,” Adamo said — and, perhaps, the same newly clean drawers.

## Parties

Natalie Pinney is co-owner of [Whim Events](#) in Boston, which is usually known for over-the-top soirées. But smaller or virtual gatherings are just as meaningful with personal touches.

“What we saw this year is that more intimate events have been amazingly meaningful and great opportunities to greet friends and family that you couldn’t in a larger group,” she said.

**Host a cocktail party.** Instead of committing to a marathon Zoom chat, check in for a predinner toast or snack. Pinney suggests creating a signature cocktail that everyone enjoys (she likes the easy mixture of cranberry juice with champagne). For an extra-special touch, mail a cocktail kit to guests using a service such as Natick-based [Lux Box](#), which offers customized gift boxes containing recipes, mixers, and accoutrements.

**Find a focal point.** Maybe grandpa dusts off his old stand-up routine (set a time limit) or your niece belts out her favorite Taylor Swift song. Or maybe you play a rapid-fire

round of trivia or put on a photo slideshow. Regardless, making your call revolve around a unifying event ties the party together so people don't zone out.

**Decorate with heirlooms.** If you're hosting a smaller gathering this year, honor those who aren't there with heirlooms and family photos. Consider ordering custom masks with a family theme or color, which can extend to sanitizers and favors.

**Finally, cling to a ray of hope.** Still, even the cutest small gathering or tech-savvy virtual party isn't the same as a virus-free bash. Take heart: A year from now, we should be better positioned to enjoy a more normal holiday season. While nobody can predict the future, "I would set my hopes at the fall, and the year after," said Swamy, the intensive care physician. "Everyone wants this to go away."

Yes, we'll drink to that.

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