



Christmas Tips



Christmas can be overwhelming for many of us but when someone in your family has dementia, this brings different challenges that are very easy to overlook.

Some useful tips to consider in the lead up to the festive season:

- Put decorations up early and slowly. Take a few days or a week so it doesn't come as a big change to a person's usual setting.
- Try to spread family visits out, as large numbers of guests and lots of noise can be overwhelming.
- Plan ahead: Consider minimising situations where your loved one is put on the spot to remember names. Think about giving a gentle reminder each time a new person arrives, or ask that people introduce themselves. Speaking with family members in advance, may help avoid embarrassing moments for someone with dementia too.
- Create a quiet room, where the person with dementia can go if things get busy. To avoid confusion and anxiety, a cup of tea can be offered away from the chaos and if the loved one wants it, sit with them and chat. Family and friends can have a little one-to-one time with the person with dementia. The person with dementia often values and benefits from gifts of company more than material gifts.
- Try to keep a routine — keep meal times at the same time so your loved one can relax, get up and go to bed at the same time.
- Play some familiar old Christmas music and look over old photographs. Photographs can be useful because people with dementia may be living in a different decade. It is common for people to believe they are at a younger point in their lives. If this is the case, use older photos to explain who people are - and don't get upset if you're your loved one gets names wrong.
- Communicate essential changes with family and friends, so they understand what's going on.
- Ask for support – a little respite from family and friends can be invaluable so you can enjoy the season too.
- Think of activities that friends and family can do with the person with dementia and everyone can enjoy.
- Encourage your loved one to take part in the cooking preparations for Christmas. They will feel useful and it can start conversations about Christmases past (your loved one's childhood Christmases as well as yours). Reminiscence is vital to increasing wellbeing.
- At Christmas lunch: hand out crackers when you are going to pull them, limit the amount of crockery and cutlery on the table and use a tablecloth that contrasts with the plates. White-on-white blends in and the person will not know where the plate ends and the cloth begins. Many people with dementia struggle to eat so sitting down to a plate piled high with food can be very off-putting. Instead, make sure they're given small portions of food they enjoy. If this means they don't eat exactly the same as everyone else, that's

fine. If they're still eating the main course when others are tucking into Christmas pudding, that's fine too, providing they're still enjoying it.

- Opening presents: Give the person with dementia time to open the present without feeling rushed. Offer help if needed but don't try to rush them. If the person does not want to open it yet, that's fine too. Leave it until later. A person with dementia can become stressed if they feel everyone's watching them, so keep present-giving calm and casual.

Watch out for tripping hazards. Presents and wrapping paper scattered all over the floor can be dangerous for a person who's frail and prone to stumbling.

- Practicing religion: If your loved one has always gone to church on Christmas Day, there's no reason to stop now. If your loved one usually goes to church around this time but now are unable to, consider online or televised services.
- If your loved one is living in a care home, it can be helpful to ask the home in advance what their plans are for Christmas Day.
- If you're bringing a loved one with dementia out of their care home over the festive period, have a few practice runs. This will help you figure out if it's realistic and achievable to take them out of their care home for Christmas.
- Include the care home staff in your planning and ask them for their advice and how they might be able to support you.
- If you're anxious that your loved one won't want to leave you at the end of the day, you could say "We have to go home now," rather than "You have to go home." If you're doing things together, it can make things less confusing or frightening.
- Once you arrive back at the home, go in with the person and have an activity ready like having a drink or showing their carer a gift that they received. Ask the staff to be there to welcome you back and help with distracting your relative when you have to leave, if needed.
- Make sure the list of emergency numbers are up to date and don't forget, just because someone is living with dementia doesn't mean they can't join in the fun.

Don't try to make Christmas totally perfect – you'll just create more stress for yourself. Instead, try to keep it real, and if things go wrong, try to keep it in perspective. Then when it's all over give yourself a big pat on the back for trying so hard and doing the very best you could.

