With the holiday season approaching, families are grappling with how to manage expectations and what celebrations will look like this year. Pandemic fatigue is setting in and people are craving togetherness and the desire to uphold family traditions. This holiday season may look different for many of us, so careful planning and being well informed about the safety guidelines for social gatherings are key to having a safe and happy holiday.

For many there is a psychological benefit to being together. We all want to stay healthy, and avoid inadvertently spreading COVID to others, while at the same time balancing our emotional need to connect with others. It’s important to familiarize yourself with national and state guidelines for social gatherings. By visiting credible sources, such as the CDC website or state and county health department’s websites, you can become familiar with the guidelines for safely gathering this holiday season.

The safest way for you to spend the holidays is virtually or with members of your household. For most people this means sacrificing what they typically look forward to, for the sake of not assuming added risks. The payoff is health and safety. There are still ways to make the most of staying home, including hosting a virtual celebration. There are even fun online trivia, board games, and card games that can be organized and played live in a group.

Decided to stay home this year? Talk about it early, so that people can adjust and come to terms with the change. You can say “we’ve been thinking things over and this is so difficult, but we just really can’t assume the risk this year”.

Outdoor celebrations present less risk than indoor gatherings, but are not risk-free. To aide in keeping everyone safe:

- Wear a mask and social distance
- Seating should be spaced out
- Food serving should be limited to certain people who will agree to follow safety precautions (hand washing, wearing a mask while prepping and serving food, wearing gloves)
- Be sure to wash or sanitize hands frequently
- Establish “grab-and-go” stations and implement a policy that if you touch it, you take it, or have guests bring their own food and drink
Indoor celebrations are less ideal due to decreased ventilation and space constraints that make distancing more challenging. You may want to consider:

- Wearing masks and social distance
- Opening doors and windows to help with ventilation
- Have a few people designated as food servers who follow established protocols
- Limit contact with commonly touched surfaces
- Avoid any self-serve food or drink items; no buffets

With both outdoor and indoor celebrations, keep the following in mind:

- **Shorter** gatherings with less people pose less risk than longer gatherings with higher numbers of participants.
- If travel will be necessary, driving is safer than flying.
- Consider asking everyone to get a COVID-19 test a week prior to the event and then quarantining between testing and seeing others.
- Discuss how an exposure or diagnosis would be communicated to everyone.
- Check whether you will face mandatory quarantines from your local jurisdiction, workplace, or child's school if you go to an area with high community transmission.

Whether you are hosting or are attending an event, it is important to establish agreed upon ground rules with all participating in the event and incorporate the recommendations above. Clear communication before, during, and after the event is essential to putting health and safety concerns at ease.

Whatever you decide is best for you, be sure to check your local health and safety guidelines, and any changes as the holidays approach. During this time of health crisis, impromptu gatherings are not ideal and may present risk if all in attendance are not on the same page regarding the ground rules. Pre-planning is more important this year than ever before. Assess current COVID-19 levels in the community hosting the gathering, as well as where any guests are traveling from. By taking those steps, looking out for each other, and planning ahead, holidays can still provide the boost that we need right now.