

Top Tips for safely celebrating Christmas in care homes during COVID

There has never been a reason to prevent the use of decorations in previous years, but obviously this year is a little different. In response to numerous requests for guidance, we have written some brief advice to help you consider how your residents and staff can safely enjoy Christmas in your setting.

Despite the temporary easing of national restrictions for a short time over the Christmas period, it is essential that care homes maintain high infection control standards to ensure residents are not put at avoidable risk of contracting COVID-19. We don't want to sound like Ebenezer Scrooge and stop all the festive fun, but when considering decorations and activities we think it's important to focus on being COVID- safe.

How COVID-19 is spread?

COVID-19 spreads from person to person through small droplets, aerosols and through direct contact. Surfaces and belongings can also be contaminated with COVID-19 when people with the infection cough or sneeze or touch them. The risk of spread is greatest when people are close to each other, especially in poorly ventilated indoor spaces and when people spend a lot of time together in the same room.

Social distancing, washing your hands and good respiratory hygiene (using and disposing of tissues), cleaning surfaces and keeping indoor spaces well ventilated are the most important ways to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

Decorations

Decorations are a traditional and popular part of Christmas celebrations. We have compiled a list of basic principles that you should consider when installing decorations in communal areas of care homes – hopefully these are not too restrictive and your staff and residents can still enjoy a little sparkle over the festive season...

Realistically most decorations cannot be easily cleaned on a daily or routine basis. Therefore, it is important to consider installing decorations in appropriate locations:

- Position decorations out of reach to avoid potential handling
- Decorations placed 2 metres from residents and staff, should not pose a significant infection risk should someone develop symptoms or be identified as COVID positive.
- Consider the quantity of decorations displayed, it may be necessary to reduce the amount of decorations used to ensure they do not hinder cleaning or impact social distancing

Light plays a significant part of Christmas celebrations and can be used in many areas of the home. Normally decorative lights are not handled, however if used in an area where there is a large amount of footfall consider placing lights in glass containers. The glass outer can be wiped as part of routine cleaning, but remember to avoid water contact with any electrical components

The tree and all its splendour can still take centre stage in an area of the home that avoids any handling. If possible position the tree 2 metres away from direct contact of staff and residents.

If a real tree is used it should be removed after 12th night and discarded. For safe disposal it can be place outside for 72 hours before pulping or removal to the local tip. Reusable plastic trees can be placed in a plastic bag for safe storage and after 72 hrs, if contaminated organisms will be less likely to viable.

Baubles and tree ornaments after Christmas should be placed in a suitable lidded container and stored. Should they have been handled or visibly soiled, clean with detergent if possible before storage.

Some Key points to consider

- The items displayed should not be easily handled by residents.
- Items used can be placed in a specific area of the home to support social distancing from items
- Ceiling decorations and garlands on staircases are the most difficult to clean and therefore would advise these are not used
- Garlands both fake and real on stair banisters, where they can be handled must be avoided
- Tree and decorations are suitable as long as suitably placed 2 metres away from residents in an area of the home that does not have a large footfall for staff accessing different rooms .Ideal places are a dedicated corner of a larger lounge or dining area. Hallways may have more regular footfall with staff and visitors passing closely by may be less advisable this year.
- Avoid too many under the tree items so the floor or tabletop can be regularly cleaned.
- Consider a tree outside the entrance or outside a window if viewable from inside. This will be lovely for staff and visitors to see too as they enter the home.
- Decorations over a fireplace mantel would be suitable as most residents will be seated 2 metres from a fireplace.
- Individual rooms could have a mini decoration – this may have to be discarded if the resident has an infection.
- Avoid placing anything in areas of the home that will result in the item being handled – stairs and bannisters to be avoided
- Tinsel can collect dust but if used on a safely positioned tree should not pose a risk of infection.
- Christmas cards should not be displayed in a way to encourage handling and should not prevent surfaces being cleaned.

Christmas activities

- Avoid any event where staff and residents cannot maintain effective social distance or if food stuffs risk being handled by anyone who is not consuming it – therefore buffets should be avoided
- Chocolates and biscuits shared plates tins or boxes of food will increase the risk of infection therefore we suggest no sharing of platters and food stuffs- chocolates and similar can be dispensed by a single staff member to individual plates or napkins.

- Remind staff that they should not eat in care areas. Removing their mask to eat in a non-staff rest area will increase the risk of infection. Eating and drinking requires staff to wash or gel hands remove face protection, wash hands thoroughly before eating or drinking followed by hand washing before replacing clean PPE and return to the resident area.
- Carol concerts could be a risk – singing will potentially increase droplet distribution, for example the national guidance for funerals does not allow any singing – consider outside events or use a recording.

Christmas Gifts

Christmas gifts from friends and family – we request all gifts to be delivered to the home by Monday 21st December (this allows 72 hours before opening)

In the event of an outbreak

In the event of an outbreak over the festive period advice can be sought from the IPC Team who will invariably be supporting the home during the outbreak. Some items may need to be taken down or removed to minimise cleaning needs. Once the outbreak is over any items that are unable to be easily wiped can either be discarded or bagged up and stored, if visibly clean, for >72 hours before displaying again or storing for Christmas 2021. The tree and all its decorations could be covered with a bag in its entirety and stored in a safe dry outside building for > 72 hours and brought back once the deep clean has been completed.