

## Stay Healthy This Holiday Season

Wherever you're headed — across the country or to another cocktail party — there are ways to stay well

by Barbara Stepko, [AARP \(https://www.aarp.org\)](https://www.aarp.org), Updated December 23, 2019 | 💬 Comments: 2



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Family get-togethers over rows of favorite dishes. Shopping mall Santas. Charlie Brown and that pitiful tree (still a heart-tugger after all these years). There's much to love about this time of year, but let's face it: The holidays can really wreak havoc on our well-being. Stress can lower the immune system ([/health/healthy-living/info-2019/managing-stress-during-holidays.html](https://www.aarp.org/health/healthy-living/info-2019/managing-stress-during-holidays.html)), calorie-filled treats can challenge the waistline, and slippery sidewalks can lead to nasty falls. Not to worry: With a little navigation you can slide through the next few weeks unscathed and with holiday spirit intact.

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# On the Road

If you'll be heading over the river and through the woods to visit friends or family for the holidays, here are a few tips for a more comfortable — and health-conscious — trip.

**Be kind to your bladder.** “Holding it in” for long periods can lead to [urinary tract infections](/health/conditions-treatments/info-2019/causes-treatment-uti.html) (</health/conditions-treatments/info-2019/causes-treatment-uti.html>), from bacteria buildup. To map out bathrooms along your route, try an app called Flush, which boasts a database of 190,000-plus bathrooms, including those with disabled access, and directions on how to get there (free on [iOS](https://apps.apple.com/us/app/flush-toilet-finder-map/id955254528) (<https://apps.apple.com/us/app/flush-toilet-finder-map/id955254528>)) and [Android](https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=toilet.samruston.com.toilet&hl=en_US) ([https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=toilet.samruston.com.toilet&hl=en\\_US](https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=toilet.samruston.com.toilet&hl=en_US))). To safely cut down on how many pit stops you'll have to make, sip fluids slowly throughout the trip, advises Linda Brubaker, a urogynecologist and clinical professor at the University of California, San Diego. “Unless you're taking something that changes the color of your urine — some vitamins or bladder pain relievers, for example — you can usually rely on the color of your urine to avoid dehydration,” she notes. “It should be light yellow during the day, though it's normal to have darker urine first thing in the morning.” Don't go without drinking, then gulp down a lot at one time, which can be hard on the bladder. Try to sip water and avoid caffeinated beverages as much as possible, since they can stimulate the bladder.

**Plan for pit stops.** Hours spent in a car can do a number on your circulation, your muscles and your vision, not to mention your psyche. Sitting for too long also puts you at risk for blood clots in your legs, notes Brubaker. So build in breaks to walk, grab a bite to eat, or simply get some fresh air. The rule of thumb: a break of at least 15 minutes for every two hours behind the wheel, and no more than eight hours a day of driving.

**Break out the munchies.** Of course, you're going to want something to nibble on during the trip. Nutritionist Carolyn Scott-Hamilton suggests nuts, dehydrated fruits and veggies, low-sugar energy bars, and homemade trail mix for on-the-road [snacking](/health/healthy-living/info-2019/healthy-snack-recipes.html). (</health/healthy-living/info-2019/healthy-snack-recipes.html>). “Their crunchy texture will satisfy your urge to nibble, and since they're nutrient-dense, they'll keep you fuller longer,” she notes. Another fave? Protein powder packets like Healthy To Go! Go Greens Powder Drink Mix. “They're thin little packets of pure powdered veggies that you can slip into your purse. I pour it into fizzy water, so it tastes like soda. It helps keep my immune system in peak form.”

**Rest up.** Catch plenty of zzz's the night before your drive. Studies show that cutting your doze time by even a couple of hours can make you more vulnerable to coming down with a cold — not to mention make you less wide-eyed behind the wheel. Experts recommend at least six hours of shut-eye before a long road trip.



A man uses a keyless entry card to enter his hotel room

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## At the Hotel

While it can be nice to retreat to a hotel room after lots of family time, staying at one can also present its own challenges. Here's how to protect yourself from unwanted surprises.

**Bring in the backups.** Pack a pair of flip-flops to use on the carpet and bathroom floor to prevent fungal infections and, yes, bring along some antibacterial wipes. The most germ-filled places in a hotel room, according to travel pro Peter Greenberg, is the TV remote. Give it a good going-over before handling — and don't forget the doorknobs, phone receiver, toilet flusher and faucets.

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**Think before you drink.** Don't be deceived by those cute little paper covers: Not all hotels sanitize their water glasses. Before downing a drink, give them a good rinsing under hot water, for at least a minute, to kill any germs.

**Find allergy-free accommodations.** Available at many hotel chains, breathe-easy rooms may include dust mite-proof bedding, well-ventilated bathrooms, and a promise of hardcore cleanings. Hyatt, Westin and Residence Inn are among the international hotel chains with such hypoallergenic room options.

**Don't let the bedbugs bite.** Even upscale hotels can have these troublesome critters. Avoid a nasty run-in by giving your room a going-over before getting settled. As soon as you walk through the door, take a whiff: Bedbugs release a pheromone that smells quite a bit like coriander. Place your luggage on the luggage rack or in the bathtub (and off the floor) until you've finished your investigation. Pull back the comforter and check the sheets, pillows, mattress and box spring — particularly around the seams. (What you're looking for: oval-shaped reddish-brown pests, about the size of an apple seed.) Pull out a credit card and run the edge along the surface of the headboard, then check for any telltale residue. Also look between couch cushions and at the edges of the carpet. If you find bugs, contact the front desk and request a new room on a different floor, or a refund.

A happy couple looking at a store display while carrying shopping bags in a mall

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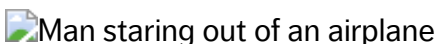
## At the Mall

Does the idea of less harried shopping trips sound like a good one? A little prep work can go a long way toward that.

**Treat shopping like a workout.** Got some athleisure in your closet? Put it on, dressy sneaks included. Then, “instead of cruising the parking lot, looking for a place that’s close to the store, go to the back forty,” says Janet Hamilton, an Atlanta-based exercise physiologist and owner of Running Strong Professional Coaching. “You’ll get more activity, and your car is less likely to get dinged.” Once inside, purposely walk to the anchor stores at both ends. “And walk *up* the escalator,” says Hamilton. “You’ll get where you’re going twice as fast!”

**Back away from the Cinnabons!** Food courts are filled with all kinds of calorie-laden stuff. How to resist temptation? For starters, don't go to the mall on an empty stomach. “And have a few snacks in your purse or pocket to munch on along the way,” says Adrienne Raimo, founder and director of One Bite Wellness. Shoot for noshes that are “high in [protein \(/health/healthy-living/info-2019/how-much-protein-do-you-need.html\)](/health/healthy-living/info-2019/how-much-protein-do-you-need.html) and fiber, because they'll fill you up.” Raimo's favorite homemade trail mix combines nuts, seeds and just a few chocolate chips. Eat it along with a piece of fruit, such as a juicy apple, for hydration.

**Add “me” to the shopping list.** A fun way to stifle the stress that comes with crowded stores and long lines: Put a small item that you've been wanting on your list. “While checking off gifts on your list, treat yourself,” says psychologist Alice Domar, director of the Domar Center for Mind/Body Health in Boston. “It doesn't have to be anything expensive. Just a little incentive to keep going.”

Man staring out of an airplane

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You're right to worry about dry cabin air and sniffing cabin mates; studies have shown that people are about 20 percent more likely to develop a cold five to seven days after short flights — and even more susceptible after long flights.

**Whisk away germs.** Studies show the “hot spots” for germs inside airplane cabins include the flush button on the toilet seat, the tray table, the seat buckles, the magazine pouch and the headrest cover. “Common cold and flu viruses can last up to 12 to 24 hours on these surfaces,” says Mark Gendreau, M.D., chief medical officer of Beverly and Addison Gilbert Hospitals in Gloucester, Mass. Bring an alcohol-based gel sanitizer (look for one with at least 60 percent alcohol), and before getting settled, wipe down areas you're likely to touch (<https://www.aarp.org/health/healthy-living/info-2018/cold-flu-airplanes-fd.html>). “There have also been contamination issues with the water in the bathrooms on aircraft,” says Gendreau. “After using the restroom, even if you've washed up, use the sanitizer on your hands.”

**Stay hydrated.** “The humidity in the passenger cabin after takeoff can dip as low as 10 percent, with the only thing contributing to the humidity being the breath of the passengers,” says Gendreau. That's bad news, since mucus membranes in the nose and mouth, a barrier against bacterial viruses, require proper hydration to function optimally. Use eye drops and a saline nasal spray to keep those membranes moist and your defenses strong, says Sharon Bergquist, M.D., an internist at Emory Healthcare in Atlanta. She notes, “Since saline sprays aren't medicated, you can use as much as you want.” And drink plenty of fluids, particularly if you're on medication. “A lot of medications have an anticholinergic property, similar to antihistamines, and dry you out,” says Gendreau. Hot drinks are particularly good: You'll get hydration and the steam will help moisturize mucus membranes.


**Use the overhead air vent.** According to a study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, your probability of catching a respiratory infection is as high as 80 percent if a sick person is seated within about three feet from you (two seats to your right or left, of the row directly in front or behind you). “Use the overhead air vent strategically,” says Gendreau. “Position it so you can feel the current on your hands when they're on your lap.” Doing so creates an air flow that “will move germs out of your space.”

**Work the aisle.** Sitting in a confined space for more than a couple hours puts you at risk for developing potentially dangerous blood clots in your legs, known as deep-vein thrombosis. Being older, obese or undergoing certain treatments — including hormone replacement therapy — gives you an increased risk of such clots. If you're on a long flight, resist what Gendreau calls “the tendency to stay in your seat, because you don't want to go through the hassle of climbing over other passengers, particularly if you've got the window seat.” On any kind of trip, get up and move around every two hours to lower your risk of leg clots.

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 Happy couple carrying Christmas tree on their shoulders  
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Embrace the brisk temps! Exposure to natural light can increase levels of the chemical serotonin to lift your mood and ward off depression ([/health/conditions-treatments/info-2018/depression-worse-older-](/health/conditions-treatments/info-2018/depression-worse-older-adults.html)

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[adults.html](https://secure.aarp.org/applications/user/subscribeFromEmail?id=19061)).



**Squeeze in exercise.** Strapped for time? Studies show that 10-, 15-, even five-minute spurts of exercise throughout the day will have health benefits, especially if it adds up to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) recommendation of 75 to 150 minutes a week. And yes, you can go at a moderate pace. [Brisk walking](/health/healthy-living/info-2019/making-walking-a-habit.html) (</health/healthy-living/info-2019/making-walking-a-habit.html>), around your neighborhood — in, say, two 15-minute segments a day — still cuts things like your risk of high blood pressure and Type 2 diabetes.

**Stay vertical.** “Falls, especially on icy surfaces in the winter season, are the most frequent cause of injury for seniors,” says Shawn Anthony, M.D., an orthopedic surgeon at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York City. “Simple falls that may cause a knee bruise in a 20-year-old can easily result in a broken wrist or hip in older adults.” One way to fend them off: Walk like a penguin (seriously). “When you have to walk across slippery surfaces, a waddling gait can help to improve stability by keeping your center of gravity over your front leg,” says Anthony. “Take shorter, shuffling steps with a flat foot, keep the feet pointed slightly outward.” Building up your core strength will also help improve your balance. “If you do fall, strong, flexible muscles will help protect your joints against ligament or cartilage damage,” says Anthony.

**Dress smart.** The right clothes will add an extra layer of protection (literally). Consider a thick, puffy down coat that will help cushion potential falls. Keep your hands free: If you start to fall, you’ll need them to brace yourself. Invest in a toasty pair of gloves, so you don’t have to shove your hands in your pockets to keep them warm. “The shoes you wear can also make a big difference in improving friction with the ground,” says Anthony. “Choose a pair with rubber, slip-resistant soles.”

 Holiday party with friends and family

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## During the Party

A study conducted by HHS found that adults gain, on average, about a pound of body [weight during the winter holidays](/health/healthy-living/info-2019/how-to-avoid-gaining-weight-holidays.html) (</health/healthy-living/info-2019/how-to-avoid-gaining-weight-holidays.html>) — and that they weren’t all that likely to lose the weight in the following year. It’s a modest increase, but those pounds add up!

**Eat beforehand.** Fasting before a holiday dinner can backfire. “Do not save up calories — that’s a recipe for weight gain,” says Cynthia Sass, a nutritionist and the author of *Slim Down Now*. “Eat regular, or smaller, meals before any feast. At dinner, start with a salad or a broth-based soup, or a few glasses of water. All have been shown to naturally help reduce overall calorie intake.”

**Drink wisely.** “Smart drink choices, caloriewise, include champagne, a light beer, a single serving of wine, or a mixed drink that doesn’t have a bunch of added sugar (think: a vodka tonic versus a sugary cosmopolitan),” says Raimo. “Alternate between an alcoholic beverage and a tall glass of water, sparkling or otherwise. This helps slow down alcohol consumption and helps rehydrate the body. In addition, “it provides a respite from the constant onslaught of incoming calories.”

**Game the buffet table.** Before putting anything on your plate, survey all of the options, Sass advises.

“Choose one or two completely worth-it splurge foods and try to balance them with other light, healthy choices, like cut veggies and shrimp cocktail.” To prevent mindless munching of nuts, chips and Peanut M&Ms, don’t linger over the food. “Physically distancing yourself from the buffet, both in terms of arm’s reach and sightline can also help,” says Sass. “Studies show that when food is right in front of us, we’re more likely to eat more.”

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## While at Home

Eating a rainbow of veggies? Getting enough snooze time? Nice start. Now add this advice to your feel-good list of things to do at home this time of year.

**Write a check.** Studies have found that volunteers are likely to experience a laundry list of benefits: lower blood pressure, lower stress levels, better self-esteem — and they are actually more likely to live longer. “There’s a phenomenon called the ‘helper’s high,’ ” says Bergquist. “When people volunteer or make a donation, they release feel-good endorphins, and get a feeling not unlike a runner’s high.”

**Pop a probiotic.** “Seventy percent of our immune system is in our gut,” says Bergquist. Studies suggest prebiotics, found in [fiber-rich foods \(/health/healthy-living/info-2019/health-benefits-fiber.html\)](/health/healthy-living/info-2019/health-benefits-fiber.html), feed the different strains of good bacteria in your gut to maintain a healthy and diverse bacterial balance. Foods that will give you the right mix of microbes: veggies (artichokes, asparagus, leeks, and onions), fruit (berries and bananas), whole grains (oatmeal and flaxseed), and legumes (lentils, chickpeas, or just about any kind of bean).

**Chill.** The stimulation of massage slows the body’s production of cortisol, a stress hormone that can take a toll on your immune system. Don’t have time for a full-fledged rubdown? Lie face up on the floor with a foam roller positioned perpendicularly under your back, and slowly role over it in an up-and-down motion. “Anything that stimulates pressure receptors, like a tennis ball, will work,” says Tiffany Field, director of the Touch Research Institute of the University of Miami School of Medicine. “Even [yoga \(/health/healthy-living/info-2019/yoga-for-fitness.html\)](/health/healthy-living/info-2019/yoga-for-fitness.html) is a form of self-massage.” You can also take a break by intentionally sitting still for a bit without dwelling on the 20 things you have to get done. “Meditation is so powerful,” says Bergquist, who notes that studies have shown a decrease in upper-respiratory infection through meditation and mindfulness. Take slow, deep breaths, while gazing ahead (or with eyes closed).

*Editor's note: This article was originally published on Nov. 19, 2018. It has been updated with additional tips.*

## More on the Holidays

- [7 mocktails to serve this holiday season \(/health/healthy-living/info-2019/mocktail-recipes.html\)](/health/healthy-living/info-2019/mocktail-recipes.html)
- [Tips for making holiday travel easier \(/travel/travel-tips/transportation/info-2019/peak-season-travel-tips.html\)](/travel/travel-tips/transportation/info-2019/peak-season-travel-tips.html)

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