

COVID-19 and Family Gatherings: Considerations



The COVID-19 pandemic makes in-person gatherings difficult and risky, even for family gatherings like Thanksgiving. This is especially the case for individuals with thalassemia. Because the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) considers that those with thalassemia might be at increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19, such individuals are discouraged from attending any in-person gatherings that include people who do not live in their households. The safest option at this time is to include only individuals who live together in one household. However, individuals with thalassemia who DO opt to host or participate in an in-person gathering with people who do not live in their households should consider the following precautions.

- 1. Consider a social gathering that does not include food.** Since masks cannot be worn while eating, indoor family gatherings that center around a meal increase the risk of spreading COVID-19. It may be beneficial to schedule an indoor family get-together strictly to socialize, and have members engage in a meal in their own homes.
- 2. Go outdoors.** If the weather permits, holding a gathering outside poses less of a risk than holding one indoors.
- 3. Continue to observe basic safety protocols.** Whether indoors or outdoors, follow basic safety protocols: Wear a mask except when eating or drinking, maintain appropriate social distancing (six feet or more), wash or disinfect hands regularly, etc. You may also want to

consider further safety measures, depending upon your assessment of risk, such as asking guests to get tested in advance or to self-isolate for a period of time in advance of the gathering.

4. **Make clear in advance that guests know about your safety protocols.** Some people resist the recommended protocols, so it may be a good idea to make sure anyone who is coming is “on board” with the safety measures that the hosting party chooses. If there is reluctance, it may be helpful to explain that the gathering includes an individual (or individuals) who might be at increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19 and that it is necessary for their health to follow the safety guidelines.

5. **Smaller and shorter are better.** Many family holiday gatherings are traditionally lengthy affairs involving many, many people. During the pandemic, shortening the event and keeping it smaller than usual helps decrease the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

6. **Avoid direct contact.** Although it may feel strange, avoiding hugging or shaking hands with people outside of one’s own household can lessen the chance of COVID-19 transmission.



7. **Improve ventilation indoors.** If the weather permits, open as many windows as possible in order to help circulate “used” indoor air outside and to draw fresh outdoor air inside. Turning on exhaust fans (those fans above stoves in kitchens and in some bathrooms) can also help improve ventilation. And those individuals with portable air cleaners should use them to further help improve the air quality at a gathering.

8. **Take precautions with food and drink.** If including food and drink in the gathering, some people may wish to ask guests to bring their own (and possibly their own plates and cups as well) to avoid unnecessary contact. If instead food and drink is being shared, be sure that whoever prepares the food and drink wears a mask and gloves. And try to limit traffic into and out of the kitchen.

9. **Spread out.** Many holiday gatherings traditionally feature a crowd of people around one big table. This year, spread things out. Even if food is included, separate people into smaller groups that are still appropriately distanced. If space permits, use several rooms rather than just one.

Please note that this list is intended to suggest options to consider but is not comprehensive. The CDC website has more information about holiday gatherings and COVID-19 at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/holidays.html>.