

Managing MCAS at Christmas: A Practical Festive Guide



The festive season can be joyful, but for those living with MCAS, it can also bring extra challenges - new foods, busy gatherings, extra stress and exposure to different things. This guide offers practical ideas to help you plan ahead, look after yourself, and enjoy the parts of Christmas that feel right for you.



Planning Ahead: Making Christmas Work for You

Christmas often brings changes - different foods, scents and routines. A little planning can help reduce surprises and make things easier:

- ✓ **Make a note of your safe foods** and keep the list handy.

Consider hosting in your own space

- This can reduce exposure to triggers and give you more control over food, scents and pacing. Ask guests to bring a dish to share, so the effort isn't all on you.

- ✓ **Check all plans ahead of time so you're not caught out.** For example, if there might be a café stop after a walk, bring your own safe options so you can still join in comfortably.

- ✓ **Let friends and family know your triggers early.** Most people will appreciate clear guidance and want to help you enjoy the day safely.

- ✓ **If you're going to someone's house,** offer to bring your own dish, so you know you'll have something safe.

Pack your medications and emergency supplies in advance (e.g. antihistamines and epipens).

Make a plan for rest and recovery

- schedule quiet time before and after big events and don't forget to pace yourself when you can!

Start present-buying early so you can spread out the cost and the effort. Watch out for new items that might be off-gassing, these can be hidden triggers for some.

Wrap as you go along, or use gift wrapping services in shops or online to save energy. Don't be afraid to have gifts delivered directly to avoid any potential triggers.

Gently let friends and family know which gifts you can or can't use. Suggesting unscented or practical gifts - or sharing a wish list - can make things easier for everyone.



Food and Drink: Staying Safe Without Missing Out

So much of Christmas centres around food, but that doesn't have to mean feeling left out.

- ✓ **Stick to low-histamine or safe versions of classic foods** (e.g. roast chicken instead of turkey if aged meats are a problem). Check out our self-management resources for more ideas: mastcellaction.org/resources



Registered charity: 1164917

www.mastcellaction.org

7 ideas



Create a 'safe festive plate' - e.g. roast veg, freshly-cooked protein, homemade stuffing with tolerated herbs.



For a simple but tasty dessert, you could try baked apples or pears with safe sweetener.



Warm drinks could include herbal teas you know you tolerate, or plain hot water with fresh ginger (if tolerated).



Managing the Environment

Strong scents, temperature changes and decorations can trigger symptoms.



Ask others not to wear perfume or light scented candles when you visit.



Use unscented or hypoallergenic decorations at home.



Real trees can bring mould and artificial ones can collect dust or may be off-gassing, so think about what feels safest for you. **You could try an alternative tree** - like a paper tree on the wall, a metal or wire tree, or a simple branch display decorated with lights.



Dress in layers - warmth indoors and cold air outside can both be triggers.



Keep windows open a crack if air feels stuffy or perfumed.

Try to eat food soon after it's cooked,

and avoid dishes that have been sitting out or simmering for long periods - histamine can build up over time.

Be cautious with spices, cured meats and fermented foods (e.g. mulled wine, pickles, cheese boards).

Be mindful of "festive" versions of foods and drinks - they often contain added

flavourings, spices or preservatives. Always check ingredient lists carefully, even for brands that are usually safe.

Bring your own safe treats so you can still join in.

Keep water nearby - dehydration can make symptoms worse for some.

Beware off-gassing gifts - some of our community highlight potential hidden triggers

To save energy, use pre-prepared or chopped vegetables, ready-to-cook options, or safe frozen foods.

Your MCAS Kit

A few things to keep with you or nearby:

- Prescribed Medications
- Antihistamines
- Epipens or other emergency items
- Emergency plan and contact information
- Safe snacks and water
- Lightweight scarf or mask for scent protection



You could keep this in a small festive bag so it feels like part of your Christmas preparation.



Social Gatherings: Connection Without Overload

Festive events can be noisy, scented and tiring. It's ok to join in on your own terms.

- ✓ Taking regular breaks helps you stay comfortable and enjoy the parts of the gathering that matter most to you.

Let people know in advance that you may need to rest and / or leave early. Check that there is a suitable space where you can rest if needed.

- ✓ **Take breaks** - consider bringing noise-cancelling headphones or earplugs if sound might be a problem.

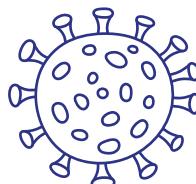
Keep a short meditation or breathing exercise saved on your phone, or try listening to calming music, an audiobook or a relaxation app.

- ✓ **Online or small gatherings can be easier for some than big ones.**

- ✓ **Provide a short explanation to simplify MCAS for others, for example:** for example:



I have a medical condition called Mast Cell Activation Syndrome (MCAS). It means that certain immune cells in my body, called mast cells, release too many chemicals, too often. Because of this I can experience a lot of different symptoms, such as itching, hives, stomach pain, headaches or trouble breathing. Different things can trigger these immune responses, like certain foods, stress, temperature changes, or even strong smells.



Staying Safe Around Winter Bugs and Covid

Winter can bring more viruses like colds, flu and Covid which can be harder to manage with MCAS. A few mindful steps can help you reduce risk and feel more in control.

- ✓ **Keep your boundaries** - it's okay to ask others to test before meeting, postpone if they're unwell, or keep visits shorter and outdoors where possible. You don't have to attend gatherings that feel risky; you can connect in other ways when the time is right.

Layer up protection - Use tools that help you feel safer - a good quality mask, nasal spray or rinse or CPC mouthwash (if these are safe and tolerated), an air purifier and regular handwashing can all reduce exposure risks.

- ✓ **Plan safer alternatives** - suggest a video call or online film night if meeting in person isn't right for you.



Know you're not alone - others in the MCAS and chronic illness community are still being careful too; it's valid to look after yourself.



For more information, refer family and friends to our Quick Guide to MCAS [here](#)



Remember: You don't have to say yes to everything. Saying no is part of self-care.





Emotional Care

Holidays can bring mixed emotions - joy and excitement, but also stress, sadness and isolation. It's OK to feel any or all of the above.

Stay connected in ways that work for you
(messages, video calls, one-on-one chats or posting Christmas cards).

Focus on what brings calm: soft lighting, your favourite music, festive films and cosy routines.

Let yourself rest - fatigue and symptoms can worsen when you push through. Try to avoid the boom and bust cycle if you can!



Finding Festive Joy (When Things Look Different)

Christmas might not look or feel the same when you're managing MCAS. You may have had to give up things that once made the season special - the scent of a Christmas tree, mulled wine, favourite foods, or festive gatherings. That can feel like a loss, and it's ok to grieve those things you once held dear. But it's still possible to create moments of warmth, comfort and connection in your own way.

Create new sensory comforts - use unscented or LED candles for a soft glow, and paper or wooden decorations instead of scented pine.

Adapt traditions - see our advent calendar (overleaf) for fun, creative and cosy ideas.

Try an alternative advent countdown - like a stationery, self-care or LEGO calendar, or one you build yourself with small, safe treats and affirmations.

Build small rituals and traditions around what matters most to you: kindness, reflection, or togetherness. Light a candle, write gratitude notes, or look through photos.

Fill a bowl, box, or jar with favourite treats, kind notes, stickers or small comforts.
Choose one whenever you need a pick-me-up.

Choose a new board game, puzzle, or shared activity each year to keep the focus on fun and connection.

Use your favourite Christmas plates, mugs or decorations. Small festive touches can help things feel special.

Allow space for loss - it's okay to miss old traditions; be gentle with yourself.

Celebrate calm - enjoy the peace of a quieter Christmas; rest, recharge and notice small moments of joy.

Don't forget to tell friends and family how you're feeling so they can help you build new festive fun!



Remember: You don't have to make Christmas perfect. Give what you can - and let that be enough.

Make your legacy a lifeline for people with MCAS, leave a gift in your will to Mast Cell Action.



For further guidance and resources see the Mast Cell Action website
www.mastcellaction.org



Mast Cell Action's

Advent Calendar



1

Create your own "ice cinema" – white blankets, a star projector and your favourite festive film

2



Make paper snowflakes or origami stars and hang them up

3

Create a "gratitude chain" - add a new paper link each day

4

Try a new safe twist on a classic dish - e.g. spice-free winter stew

5



Craft a homemade ornament from safe materials (felt, paper, wood)

6



Bake a treat and gift it to a neighbour or friend

7

Support a small business by sharing or buying one thing.

8



Go on a walk or drive to see twinkly lights

9

Make your own Christmas cards or e-cards

10

Write a letter to your future self to open next December

11

Try a Christmas colouring page or paint a mini scene

12



Make your own Christmas quiz or scavenger hunt

13

Dance to your favourite festive song

14



Donate something small to a charity or food bank

15

Listen to a Christmas choir or carol concert online

16

Write down 5 things you're proud of this year

17

Learn about a festive tradition from another country

18



Make homemade gift tags or wrapping paper

19

Decorate a notebook or journal for the new year

20



Play a board game or try a new puzzle

21



Dress up in festive jumpers and have a Christmas photoshoot.

22

Listen to an audiobook of 'A Christmas Carol' or 'The Snowman'

23

Write three gentle intentions for the coming year

24



Watch a virtual pantomime or theatre show from home

