

Short Communication

Christmas and New Year for Cancer Patients: Ideas for Relief and Entertainment in the Spotlight

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Abstract

Introduction: Cancer represents a chronic debilitating disease. During the Christmas and New Year period an oncologic patient is more vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness. **Aim:** Our work and e-book focused on the well-being amelioration and meaning of life of cancer patients and caregivers during this festive period. **Methods:** An interdisciplinarily group consisted of cancer patients, care givers, cancer societies and physicians of different specialties, created an e-book (in English and Greek languages) entitled: «Ideas for Celebrating Christmas & New Year Holidays. Dedicated to our cancer patients». We propose practical ideas for relief and entertainment in the spotlight, tailored for all disease stages. **Conclusion:** Cancer patient's management goes beyond just caring for the therapeutic interventions. We emphasize its importance in supporting and enhancing patients' needs, as an important component of quality care.

Keywords: Christmas & New Year Holidays; Cancer Patients; Relief; Entertainment; Ideas.

Introduction

The festive period around Christmas and New Year, seems to have a major impact on psychosocial stress [1]. A higher-than-average proportion of deaths at home were observed [1-3]. People can be overwhelmed with expectations, memories, irritations, conflicts, disappointments and loneliness [1]. Increases in divorces, attempted suicides, alcohol-related deaths and domestic violence have been observed, as well as a shift in homicides [2].

In increase in death rates among cancer patients has been also observed during the festive season [4, 5]. These patients should be the focus of special attention to reduced stress and improve quality of life [6-10]. A large interdisciplinary team -with European and Greek patient advocacy groups- has worked together to create a guide with suggestions for entertainment and recreation during the holidays, specifically tailored for cancer patients. The aim of the present work and its related e-book entitled: «Ideas for Celebrating Christmas & New Year Holidays», is to support cancer patients during the festive period.

Support and contentment methods for oncology patients during the holidays

- Try to be yourself and avoid thinking too much about your health.
- Talk to your doctor and your oncology care team about possible side effects of your condition or treatment, as finding a pharmacy can be stressful these days.
- Keep a supply of any medication you may need. The most common types of medication you may need are painkillers, anti-nausea and anti-diarrhoea tablets, and laxatives. Find out what kind of medication might be useful and make sure you have it with you.
- Ask your doctor if you are immunosuppressed, as some people mistakenly believe their immune system is weak and avoid social interaction. However, not all chemotherapy,

radiotherapy or other types of treatment necessarily cause this. So don't miss out on interacting with your favorite people for no apparent reason.

- Don't isolate yourself! Keep in touch with people, whether in real life, by phone or social media. Stay active and social online, download applications and join groups that can help you share information or meet people who know what you're going through. Some applications allow you to have a virtual drink with a friend or play an online game.
- Talk to your relatives and friends, get emotional, and if you feel the urge to do so, you can cry even more intensely. If it's good for you, share your problem with others, but try to keep it short so you can enjoy the rest of the day.
- Hug your loved ones or pets as much as you can.
- You can ask for their help if there is something you need. For instance, they could buy some presents on your behalf or send a greeting card to a person that is far away.
- Keep your house or garden clean and tidy or ask for some help. If possible, try to change the room that you spend most of your time in or try redecorating it.
- Decorate your house. If you're feeling tired, the decorating process can become more fun if you have friends and family around for assistance and social interaction.
- If you are uncomfortable with your new body image, here are some ways to boost your confidence: a) Take a shower with your favorite soap or shampoo, b) Have your hair or makeup done at home by a hairdresser or aesthetician, c) Put on clean shoes and clothes, d) Put on makeup, your perfume or aftershave.
- Think about your favorite foods, desserts, drinks and beverages. Make a list of the ingredients you need and ask your doctor which ones you are allowed to have and in what quantities.
- If some ingredients are not allowed, ask about possible alternatives. Find out what restaurants, bakeries, theater and cinema venues are open during these days.

- Some therapies may cause a change in the taste of food (metallic taste or just different).
- Use a different water brand or try adding some spices to your food.
- You can experiment with new savory or sweet recipes and even beverages/drinks from various parts of your country or different countries.
- Try different local recipes (from the ones you're used to making).
- You could adopt festive traditions from different countries. Here are a few examples: a) Stollen from Germany (a bread type with dried fruits, nuts and icing sugar), b) Brunsli from Switzerland (chocolate cookies with cinnamon and clover, covered with granulated sugar), c) Banketstaaf from the Netherlands (marzipan rolled up in dough and orange jam), d) Truchas de Navidad from the Canary Islands (small crescent-shaped pastries filled with yams and almonds) etc.
- You could try an online search to find the recipes that suit you best in terms of taste and ingredients allowed.
- You can adopt festive customs from different nations. In Iceland, there is a special tradition called Jolabokafloð or "Christmas book flood" where families exchange their Christmas gifts at Christmas Eve. The gifts are books and the family members read them altogether while drinking hot cocoa.
- Have a small celebration wearing your tracksuits or pajamas. Having comfortable clothes on will make you feel more relaxed.
- Take part in team events in your city or religious places (church service).
- Play board games (e.g. chess, backgammon).
- Sing happy songs, carols (especially in pediatric oncology), dance and do not hesitate to celebrate. Music is therapeutic. In a pediatric oncology ward in Milan, Italy, the patients created a Christmas song that went viral. It was called 'Christmas balls' because of the tree decorations, snowballs and bald heads caused by chemotherapy.
- Humor is good for you! Look out for clever jokes and films. They will cheer you up.
- Read interesting books (as well as audio e-books).
- Watch concerts, theatrical plays (on TV) or visit museums (virtual tours are also available).
- Express your feelings, stress fear, and ask for understanding and help from your oncology team, relatives and friends.
- Surprise yourself or your loved ones with a present after an online shopping spree. It is so much more convenient since it can be delivered at your door.

- You should act and think in a way that will give more meaning to your life and encourage you to move forward. You could focus on: a) caring for the environment (e.g. planting a tree), b) increasing your creativity (e.g. making greeting cards through arts and crafts), c) volunteering - increasing your empathy (e.g. offering your advice to vulnerable social groups who need it).

The e-book is available to share with readers in the following link: https://ellok.org/imerides_ekstraties/christmas_ideas-eng/

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9. What not to say to a cancer patient at the holidays.
10. Coping with Cancer at the Holidays: 7 Tips from Someone Who Has Been There.