



# How to Cope With Holiday Stress and IBS

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## Holiday Stress and IBS: How to Avoid Flare-Ups

When your schedule gets frantic over the holidays, it is natural to worry, notice more discomfort and eventually struggle with IBS symptoms. Even festive gatherings can bring a sense of dread, especially if you feel your symptoms have become unpredictable, and you might find yourself plotting to get out of obligations rather than enjoying the holiday camaraderie. But before you let your body get the better of you, consider how a change in perspective and a bit of forethought can keep your IBS in check over the indulgent and hectic holiday season.

### Helpful Approaches for Better Comfort

A little bit of preparation can go a long way, especially when food and travel is involved. The more often you practice these helpful approaches, the more quickly you will be able to clear your digestive hurdles.

#### Plan Ahead, Plan Thoroughly

Planning ahead can significantly reduce your level of stress, and the less stress you feel, the more at ease your stomach and bowels will be. The key is to cover all your bases, so put a bit of thought into what you might feel and what you might need in any possible situation.

If you are planning on attending an event, think about what outfit would be the most comfortable for you and what you would need if your IBS symptoms begin to act up. Locate the washrooms and have an escape plan – that is, what you will say if you need to make an early exit? Remember that most people are more sympathetic than judgmental when it comes to medical conditions, so you could mention your IBS and your accompanying concerns to the host of the event, in case they may be able to help.

#### Take Control With Mental Exercises

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) can do wonders for your perspective, and ultimately, your physical symptoms. Essentially, every thought or idea you have could be negative or positive, and CBT teaches you how to take the positive path for better emotional stability and more control over physical outcomes.

Instead of thinking about how the worst case scenario would embarrass or distress you, think about how you would handle and overcome the challenges of worst case scenario. You'll find that the more you practice positive positioning, the easier it becomes to assure yourself (quite rightly) that things are not as bad as they seem to be.

#### Eat Strategically

It may seem reasonable, but avoiding food altogether will probably makes things worse when you finally do eat. Instead of starving yourself before a big event, eat small meals throughout the day and continue to snack on stomach-friendly foods through the party, but eat slowly and take breaks, so you do not shock your stomach.

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Everyone is different when it comes to food triggers, so get to know your particular danger foods and be extra cautious with dishes you do not know. Treats can be especially tempting when you see others indulging, but remind yourself that your body is sensitive and you will be much better off in the long-run if you go easy on the carb-heavy, empty-calorie fare.

### **Reducing Holiday Stress to Ease IBS**

Some sufferers acknowledge that holiday stress leads directly to symptoms, while others do not realize just how toxic stress can be. In reality, stress is at the root of many IBS episodes, and while you may not be able to avoid every stressful event, there is a lot you can do to diminish the effect on your physical and mental health:

- **Scale back the shopping.** Fighting holiday crowds is one of the quickest ways to stress yourself out, so avoid busy malls at peak times. Online shopping is a good solution. Or, you may want to re-think your gift giving routine altogether: concentrate on small, comfortable gatherings and activities you can do with family and friends to spend time, rather than money, on the people you love.
- **Sleep well.** Recovery is vital for a healthy body, and that goes for IBS symptoms too. The better you rest your body and mind, the better your systems will function, so improve your sleep hygiene and get on a regular bedtime routine.
- **Relax frequently.** A long, warm bath is a great way to soak your troubles away, but you should also learn how to take short, effective breaks from your hectic surroundings. Progressive muscle relaxation, visualization, or simple deep breathing can relax your muscles and center your mind. If you cannot seem to gain control over your bouts of anxiety, consider taking an anti-anxiety medication before particularly stressful situations.

When you change up your routine to compensate for your IBS, you have the opportunity to begin healthier holiday habits. Get more organized by making lists (and referring to them), take some pressure off yourself by reducing your obligations (at least a few of them are self-imposed) and make more time for self-care. Instead of constantly battling your condition, learn how to live with it and soon you will gain better confidence and control over your symptoms.