

MEDIA RELEASE

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Call to Action: Checking in on Elderly People over the Festive Season

As we move into the Christmas and Festive Season it is easy to lose focus on what is important when you are so busy trying to get a Chrissie feast on the table or get to all of the sales. The Sydney North Primary Health Network are putting the message out this holiday season to make sure you check in with elderly members of your community who can sometimes be forgotten over Christmas and New Year.

“Christmas and the New Year period can be a time of extreme loneliness for some elderly people in our community. Experiences of loss and bereavement can be heightened during this period and the hot weather can have serious health and medical impacts,” says Sydney North Primary Health Network CEO Lynelle Hales.

“We are asking residents of the Northern Sydney region and indeed all Australians, to reach out, check in, and spend time with elderly family members, neighbours and ageing members of the community during this challenging time of year for vulnerable and isolated populations. With around 16% (140,498 people) of the total Northern Sydney population aged over 65-years-old, there’s bound to be an elderly person residing near you,” encourages Ms Hales.

Older people can experience a greater level of isolation and loneliness during the Christmas period, as many home visit and community services are not available over this time, or are reduced to essential services, exacerbating the issue. Health professionals acknowledge a direct link between loneliness and the following health conditions which are common in our elderly residents - Alzheimer’s disease and dementia, obesity, increased vascular resistance, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, sleep disorders, diminished immunity, reduction in independent living, alcoholism, depression, and suicidal states.

Isolating Factors for our elderly population over the festive season might include:

Mobility

Mobility is often a factor hindering interaction due to concerns of falling. Help elderly people overcome these challenges by making sure access to their property and home is safe. Suggest using support services such as community transport, or discounted taxi vouchers where possible. Home modifications may also be available via [myagedcare](#) to assist elderly people to move around safely within their home including bathroom modifications, ramps, and aids. Also consider talking to you GP about a falls prevention assessment for your home. Your local GP can refer you to a number of available services to assist with this assessment.

Hot Weather

Older people are among those most at risk of heat-related illness. Due to normal age-related changes in the body, older people do not always recognise that they are over-heated. In addition, older people are more likely to have a chronic medical condition and could be taking medication that may interfere with the body's ability to regulate fluid. Here is a great guide from the Department of Social Services on how to care for elderly people in the warmer weather – [CLICK HERE](#). Hydration and keeping the home cool is central to this care.

Anxiety

Remember if the elderly person lives on their own, it may be difficult for them to adjust to a room full of people. Attending an event with noise and movement, combined with an altered routine has the potential to make them feel anxious. It is important to dedicate quiet time to sit and speak to them individually; providing a cup of tea or mince tart could simply be enough for them.

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Loneliness and Depression

Christmas is a time for friends and family, but many older people spend more time reflecting on people they've lost at this time of year. In amongst all the excitement and energy of Christmas, it's important to stay connected with older friends, relatives, and neighbours who are finding it difficult to stay engaged. You can ensure they still feel respected and an important member of the community. Help them attend their family get-togethers, and involve them in trips to Christmas activities such as carols and concerts.

"There are a number of community Christmas events on over the festive season so please check in with your local council to see what they have on their holiday calendar. Make some time to take out an elderly person to enjoy the festive season and help them connect with their local community. By following some of the simple tips above you can also help ensure older people stay safe, well and cool over the hot Christmas months. However, if there is a need for medical attention you can call Healthdirect for 24-hour health advice from a nurse on 1800 022 222. We also encourage people to call their regular GP and find out when their closing times are over the Christmas period. And of course, in a medical emergency call 000," says SNPHN General Manager of Primary Care Advancements and Integration, Cynthia Stanton.

There are also numerous health services available for elderly people to call over the Christmas period.

In the After Hours period you can phone for a home visiting doctor service. They will visit you or a member of your family in your home. Some services offer bulk billing while others require a gap payment. Some Private Health Insurers may also provide a free GP-to-home service to their members.

Healthdirect:	1800 022 222
National Home Doctor Service:	137425
myhomeGP:	1300 968 737
myagedcare:	1800 200 422
Lifeline:	13 11 14
Dementia Support Australia:	1800 699 799 (24hrs)
After Hours Palliative Care Services:	1800 548 225 (5pm -9am)

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Here are some key points to help you care for an elderly relative, neighbour or friend over Christmas time:

1. Be prepared with Medication

Make sure all medication needs are attended to and necessary prescriptions are filled to cover the Christmas season – especially if you are going away with an older member of your family. Consult their local GP and pharmacist and have Webster-paks ready to go.

2. Stay Hydrated

Drinking water is one way you can stay healthy and out of an emergency department during the holidays if you are elderly. To make it easier to stay hydrated, have water easily accessible at home and keep bottled water in a purse or bag when running errands or attending festive season events.

3. Follow Dietary Restrictions

Some elderly people have special dietary requirements, such as one that is low in sodium. It can be difficult to adhere to a diet during the Christmas season - especially if there aren't any healthy options available. To make it easier to follow dietary guidelines, plan ahead and keep healthy options like fresh-cut vegetables and fruit on hand.

4. Drink in Moderation

Drinking too much alcohol can impair functionality for older people, and drinking alcohol with certain medications can have adverse side effects. Consider offering fun, alcohol-free drinks so everyone can celebrate the holidays.

5. Shake up Traditions

Between cleaning the house and cooking for big numbers, hosting a big holiday meal can be a source of stress. If an older relative traditionally hosts a big holiday meal, consider passing the tradition on to the younger generation of family members. If the relative insists on hosting, we recommend younger family members volunteer to clean or prepare part of the meal. Help out!

6. Reduce Financial Strain

For many older people, especially those on a fixed income or pension, the holidays can be a financial challenge due to purchasing gifts for many family members. To reduce financial stress, consider having a family gift bag, where everyone contributes one gift.

7. Rest after Travelling

For a lot of people, the holidays are a time to travel long distances to visit family and friends. Whether they travel by car, train, or plane, keep in mind that an older relative might want to rest upon arrival. Avoid going straight into family festivities and activities when an older relative arrives and allow them time and space to rest.

8. Make Homes Accessible

If older relatives are visiting your home for the holidays, ensure your home is safe and accessible. Be mindful of hazards in your home such as hidden or dark steps or rugs with raised corners which can be trip and fall threats. If it is possible, have an older relative sleep on the first floor of your home, close to a bathroom and use nightlights so that they don't stumble in the dark in unfamiliar surroundings.

9. Take Breaks

Between celebrations and shopping, the holidays can involve busy days and late nights. If you are planning an all-day outing, make sure to schedule in some time for a nap or a way to relax for a bit, even if it is just to have a cuppa. Elderly people aren't the only ones who will appreciate that – everyone will.

10. Stay Involved

Recognise that elderly people still want to feel they are part of the holidays. For many, that may include helping with holiday preparations and contributing to the Christmas feast. Keep them involved by having them cook their favourite traditional Christmas dish or maybe help decorate the home.

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