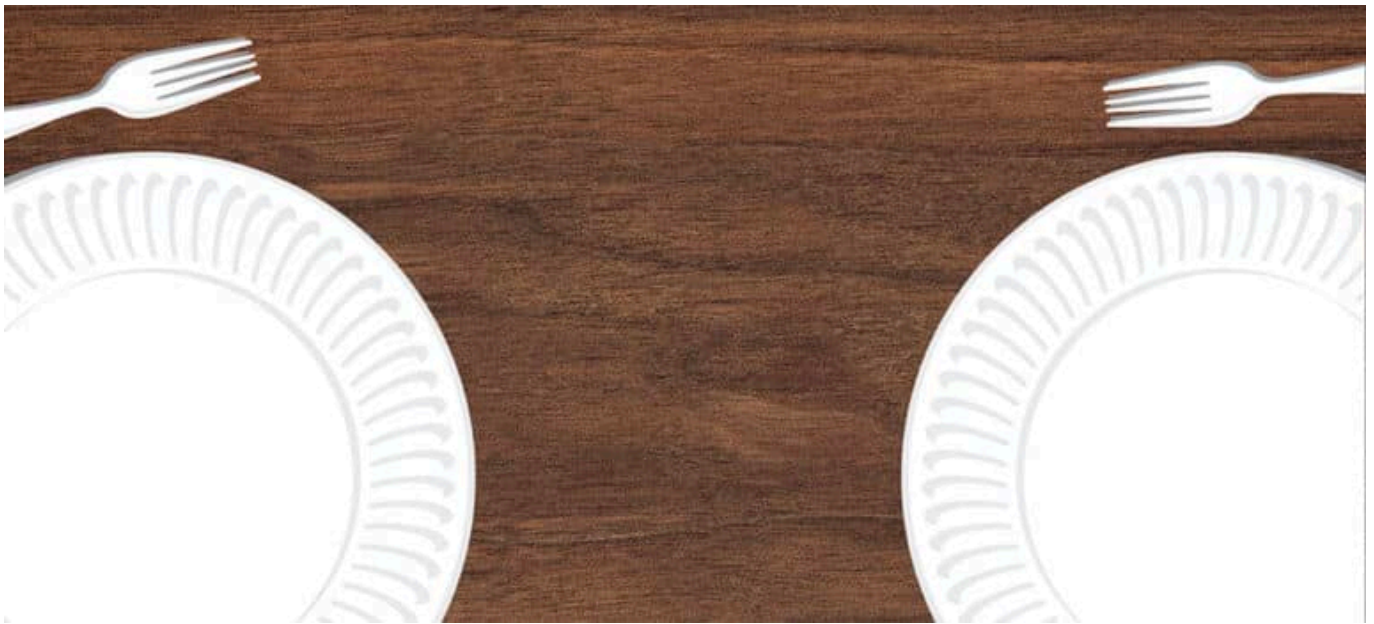


Tips for hosting houseguests while managing MS symptoms



Be prepared when company is coming for holidays and get-togethers

by Shara Rutberg



Ann Marie Johnson, who lives with MS, says planning is key.

The table was beautifully set for a dozen. The playlist was made. The turkey, perfectly cooked and staying warm in the oven, filled the Brooklyn apartment with a mouth-watering cloud of

Thanksgiving set to envelope 11 guests when they walked through the door in an hour.

And the hostess? She was taking a nap.

But that strategic snooze was all part of her plan, says Ann Marie Johnson, who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2002. “Planning, planning, planning is a major part of my life with MS, and it’s definitely how I’m able to manage having people over, especially for a holiday dinner,” she says, adding that the evening was “wonderful.”

From Turkey Day dinner to a weekend of incoming in-laws, having guests can strike fear in the hearts of anyone. For people living with MS, symptoms — even just the possibility of symptoms — can make things more challenging. Here are some strategies and tips from experts and people living with MS to help you manage.

Buh-bye Martha

A primary key to success is letting go of perfection, says Aviva Gaskill, PhD, a clinical psychologist outside of Philadelphia. “Let that inner Martha Stewart go,” she says. “Say to yourself that ‘something’s not going to go the way I planned and that’s OK.’ Reframing things to have that mindset from the get-go can help you laugh things off and be more resilient.”

“Face it: Things probably weren’t perfect before!” jokes Jenny Talbot Benson, 44, who was diagnosed with MS in 2022. “Even before your diagnosis, did you ever have the perfect party? Was your house ever perfectly pristine? Were all the decorations Pinterest-worthy? The funny thing is that we have this image of ‘before,’ — and don’t get me wrong, there were things I was so much better at before — but by no means were they ever perfect.”



Jenny Talbot Benson (front row, second from right) advises against trying to be perfect when hosting guests and dealing with MS symptoms.

Perfection isn't the point, adds Susan Wegener, a licensed social worker who works with chronically ill clients in Austin, Texas. "The point is to allow an opportunity for socialization and to enjoy the people you care about — that's so important for your well-being."

Start small and be picky

Don't invite the whole neighborhood to your first gathering. And don't make it a complicated meal. "Consider having a small gathering with just a few close friends who care about you and understand your MS diagnosis," Wegener says. "They will understand if things don't go to plan. That way there will be less pressure."

"Be picky about who is going to be in your company," says Johnson, who has been an MS peer counselor and group leader. Her "circle" includes about 10 people who "know where the bodies are buried and will drive the getaway car," she says with a laugh. These are the people she's most comfortable with, the people who "let me be me," she says.

"I'm too old not to be me," says Benson, who lives in Bradenton, Florida. "And I'm too old to hang out with people who can't accept me for me. You want to surround yourself with people who get you — the new you — and your new reality."

Be honest

Take a good look at exactly what hosting company will entail — and be honest with yourself about what you can handle and how much of a toll that tasks might take, the experts advise. Taking a thoughtful inventory of your hosting duties can help you plan accordingly. For example, they say, if cooking an entire meal by yourself is too much work, order out or buy prepared food. For Thanksgiving, Johnson ordered a cooked turkey and warmed it up in her oven.



If cooking an entire meal by yourself is too much work, order out. Photo:

iStock

"I've mostly given up cooking for friends. It's exhausting. We have had some great outside catering instead," Jackie Donaghey posted on the Society's Facebook page. "It's really

enjoyable and helps avoid fatigue. Doesn't have to be anything fancy, and people really appreciate it. Once the wine flows, who cares anyway!"

Gaskill suggests being honest when extending invitations, too — about what may happen and about your worries. "You can say 'I'd really love to have you over for dinner, but I'm worried I might have to cancel at the last minute. Would you be OK if we have to cancel?' " she says. Most close friends or family who are understanding people are going to be fine with that — and those are the people you want to spend time with.

"I find the more honest I am, the better," says Benson. If, on the day of the event, "it's a bad day, I tell them. If I need a nap, I take one. If I'm hurting and we switch to take-out, that's what we do."

If they're part of your posse of close friends and family, your guests will probably already know you have MS. But if you're inviting people you don't know as well, whether or not to tell them may be a harder question, Wegener says. "Sharing your MS diagnosis calls for self-disclosure and being vulnerable. We cannot control how someone else may respond to us so deciding who to share your MS journey with is a very personal choice."

"It's not always a fantastic idea to talk about your diagnosis," Gaskill says. "Let's say you're having your partner's boss over for dinner and your partner's up for a promotion. It might not be helpful to tell them." In cases where you choose not to disclose, remember you can always partially do so. For example, you can say you haven't been feeling well lately though your doctor says it's not contagious.

Yes, you'd love help

Ask for help and accept help when it's offered. Build help into your event. Johnson's fabulous Thanksgiving was a potluck. "I asked everyone to bring the side dish that made them think of Thanksgivings of their childhood," says Johnson, who now lives in Syracuse, New York. "And one of the best parts about a potluck is fewer dishes, too. What they bring in is what they take out."

Give guests an opening to help when you invite them, Gaskill suggests. You can say, 'I'd really love to have you over, but I'm worried it's going to be a lot for me.' " That's a double invitation — asking them to come and asking them to help.

Asking for help can be empowering, Wegener says. "It keeps others from having to anticipate your needs. For example, you may be sitting at the dinner table and struggling to stand up and think, 'Why is no one helping me? Don't they know I need them to help me stand or help clear the table?'" she says. "But if you ask for specific help, you're getting your own needs met. It shows a lot of strength, and it's definitely a skill you can build."

"Allowing people to help and being OK with admitting when you're struggling (which is super hard, even to admit it to myself) are important," Rebecca Ginkins Schluckebier posted on

Facebook.

Why it's worth the effort

"The research shows that the people who do the best cognitively with MS over time are people who have the strongest perceived support networks," Gaskill says. Being able to sit down in person with people you love, your family, your chosen family and have a conversation is important, it's connection," she says. It cements your network.

"Everybody needs to have a little fun, right?" asks Benson. "It's just so important because loneliness is a killer. And if you shut yourself off because you're afraid you can't do it, you're going to end up very, very lonely."

Sometimes, that means pushing yourself, she says. "If I woke up every day and acted like I felt when I wake up, I would never do anything. None of us feel great. ... You have to keep trying, or we'll spend every day in bed. And there's just not that many good things on Netflix."

"Hosting company is absolutely worth it," says Johnson. Just do what you can to make things easy, like using paper plates to set that beautiful Thanksgiving table. "The nice paper plates," she says with a laugh.

More hosting tips

Before

- Schedule your event for the part of the day when you do best.
- Do as much as you can before the day of the event.
- Get a good night's sleep.
- Pick comfortable clothes.
- Skip the high heels.
- Don't skip your meds.
- Have plastic bags and containers out to make putting things away easy.

During

- Listen to your body and take breaks when needed.
- Pace yourself.
- Step into a quiet room when needed.
- Don't just serve — eat and drink (but not much alcohol).
- Sit down — it's your event, let your guests come to you.
- Enjoy your guests — all the tasks will eventually get done, and your time with people is limited.

Shara Rutberg is a writer in Longmont, Colorado.