

HOLIDAY Health Report 2019

Researched & Compiled By: Amy Hereford Richardson, MSW, MPH
Medically Reviewed By: Holly Phillips, MD & RxSaver Medical Expert

Introduction By Holly Phillips, MD

For many, the winter holidays are a time of merriment, mistletoe and joy. Yet, as this year's RxSaver Health Holiday Report shows, our yuletide cheer comes at a cost—the holidays are hard on our health.

The days between Thanksgiving and the New Year bring with them new sources of stress and can worsen stressors we already feel. More than a third of Americans report high levels of holiday stress, while almost half describe being “filled with dread” by the financial burden of the season.

And all that stress affects our choices—overeating, imbibing too much and neglecting exercise are hallmarks of the holidays with the health effects lasting long after the festivities have finished.

But it doesn't have to be this way. With some conscious planning we can avoid many of the season's pitfalls without ever having to channel our inner Grinch. And knowing what they are is the first step. This Report shines a spotlight on some of the most significant issues and, in my humble opinion, the flu should be front and center.

If you think the holidays are hard, try the holidays with the flu.

Flu season has been off to an early start this year, with influenza activity higher than normal for four weeks in a row, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). This could signal a more virulent winter than usual. The single best way to prevent the flu is to get your flu shot. It's not too late, since the season can stretch through mid-April.

If you do come down with the flu, prescription antiviral medications can lessen the length and severity of the illness when started right away, and the Report shows more and more patients are utilizing RxSaver to make sure they're getting the best prices on these drugs.

Lastly, don't forget to take time out for some self-care. Be kind to yourself by recognizing what the holidays offer, perhaps more family time, or time to rest, and recognize what the holidays shouldn't offer, perfection where it didn't previously exist.

—Holly Phillips, MD & RxSaver Medical Expert

KEY FINDINGS

- 85% of Americans overeat during the holidays.²²
- LDL cholesterol tends to increase 20% over the holidays.¹²
- 47% of Americans are “filled with dread” by the prospect of spending money over the holidays.²²
- 38% of people reported increased stress during the holiday season.²³
- Sales in the cold and sinus market grew by 4.5% from 2016 to 2017.¹⁹
- The average person with Type 1 diabetes spent \$18,494 on healthcare expenses in 2016.¹
- American adults with diabetes report using an average of 5.9 different prescribed medications.¹ Holiday overindulging can potentially cause a need for using more medicine and supplies than normal.
- Over one in three (36%) who currently suffer or have previously suffered from a mental health condition say the holidays would trigger symptoms of their condition.³⁹

Managing Acute Conditions During the Holiday Season

The holidays, at their best, are a time of great celebration and relaxation, or a time to connect with family and friends. But the added financial pressures, emotional stressors and travel conundrums can make the holiday season a difficult time for 88% of Americans.²²

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Additionally, the holiday season, especially due to increased travel,²⁴ is also a time when people tend to find themselves feeling a little under the weather or downright sick. When illness strikes during the holidays, it can make already stressful times even more complicated and draining.

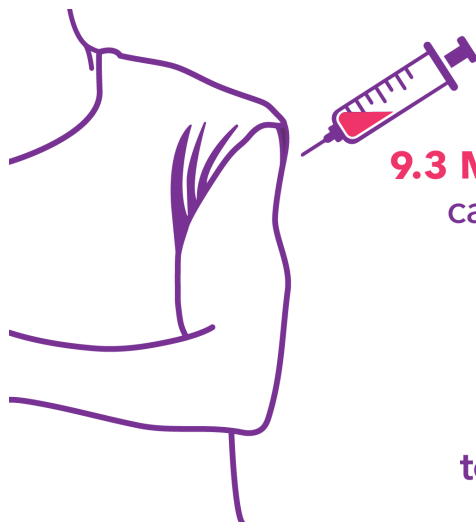
Are Americans Prepared for Cold and Flu Season?

The saying, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” is definitely relevant when it comes to preventing infection from colds and flu during the holiday season. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that everyone aged 6 months and older get a yearly flu shot.⁸

Despite this recommendation, during the 2018-2019 flu season, only 45%²⁰ of US adults received the vaccine.

During the 2017-2018 flu season, flu vaccine manufacturers shipped approximately 155.3 million³² doses of the flu vaccine.

During the 2018-2019 flu season, vaccine manufacturers projected that they would be able to provide between 162 million and 169 million doses.³³ Each year, 2.3 million to 49 million cases of the flu are reported. Yet, only 52% of adults in the United States plan to get a flu shot this season.³⁶



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In a survey conducted by Kelton Research for RxSaver by RetailMeNot, 43% of Americans received a flu shot as of early December 2019. However, people still have reservations around the vaccine. Over three in 10 (31%) of those who did not receive a flu shot this year say it is due to not believing they work. An additional 16% say a flu shot is not important for their health.³⁹

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While a vaccination might be one of the best ways to prevent the flu, vaccines are not the only way to fight against colds and flu during the holidays.

Keeping a few favorite cold remedies on hand can help. While cough syrup, chest rub and other over-the-counter medicines are established soldiers in the fight against colds and flu, sometimes additional help is needed and a healthcare provider might suggest an antiviral drug like Tamiflu (oseltamivir) or Xofluza.

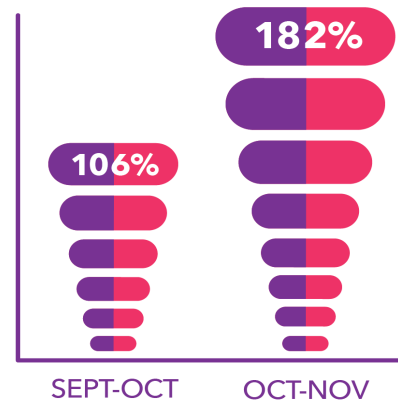
Tamiflu & Xofluza: Antiviral Superheroes of Flu Season

Antiviral medication, when taken within 48 hours of contracting the flu, can shorten illnesses and make symptoms milder for people considered at greater risk of developing [complications](#) from the flu, like those who have asthma, heart disease, are pregnant, or are 65 years of age and older.²⁹

RxSaver saw a steady increase of prescriptions for Tamiflu (oseltamivir) or its generic (oseltamivir) month over month from September to November.

RxSaver coupon redemptions on the generic for Tamiflu increased 106% between September and October and 182% between October and November.

RxSaver coupon redemptions for **generic Tamiflu (oseltamivir)** **increased 106%** between September and October and **182%** between October and November



Additionally, Xofluza (baloxavir marboxil) is an antiviral medication used to treat the flu. The 2019-2020 flu season is only the second season that Xofluza was made available to aid in fighting the flu. The medication is noted to be especially useful should flu sufferers develop resistance to other antiviral medications on the market.³⁴ It is also useful in reducing sick time and lessening the risk of infecting others.³⁸

In October 2019, the US Food and Drug Administration approved [Xofluza](#) for single-dose use in people who are at a high risk of developing complications due to flu.³⁵ For those without insurance, the cost of Xofluza can be prohibitive at \$150 per prescription as compared to Tamiflu which is more popular since it has been on the market longer and has a cheaper generic form available.³⁷

Increase in Cold/Bronchitis Medications

Tamiflu and other antivirals are not the only medications that see an increase in use as a result of the cold and flu season. Over-the-counter medicines are also commonly recommended. From 2014 to 2019, cough and cold medicine manufacturing showed an average increase of [2.8%](#) each year.¹⁷ Additionally, sales in the cold and sinus market grew by [4.5%](#) from 2016 to 2017 which is largely due to the severity of the cold and flu season as well as a mutation of the 2017 flu strain that made flu vaccines only about 15% effective.¹⁹

According to the CDC, reports of flu-like symptoms increased by [2.1%](#) between the end of October and beginning of November.¹¹ The CDC's weekly influenza [map](#) shows that as the weeks progress during flu season, more and more states experience increased flu activities and wide-spread outbreaks.¹⁴

These increases in prescriptions and over-the-counter medicines mean that, especially during the holiday season, so many Americans need to be ready to take care of themselves and their family.

Managing Chronic Conditions During the Holiday Season

Many people with chronic conditions like heart disease or diabetes sometimes suffer during holiday periods. Researchers in Sweden found a [15%](#) increase in the risk for heart attack on Christmas Eve.² In the United States, abnormal heart rhythms called "[holiday heart syndrome](#)" are associated with overeating and excessive alcohol consumption.²

Holidays and Medication Adherence

Regardless of the time of year, chronic health conditions are usually accompanied by routine prescriptions. And taking medicine at standard times during the holidays can sometimes be a challenge.

Another challenge for many Americans, especially during the holidays, is financial pressure. This pressure sometimes compels people to skip filling their prescriptions as 47% of Americans

have, in the past, chosen to avoid paying for prescription medication to be able to cover other expenses.¹⁸

Financial pressure is another challenge for Americans during the holidays

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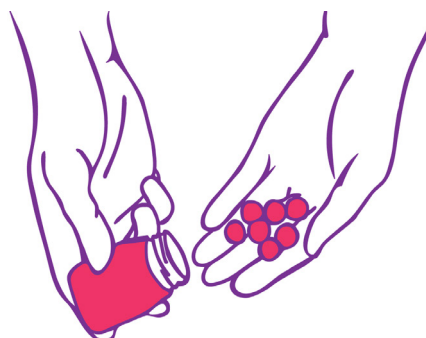
While older Americans who take many medications might be perceived as being susceptible to these kinds of hard choices, Gen Z/millennials are almost twice as likely as older generations to have avoided paying for medicine in favor of paying for something else.¹⁸

26% of Americans confirmed they would take prescription medications during the holidays more often than any other time of year.³⁹

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And nearly 31% of Americans have a health-related emergency fund dedicated to unexpected illnesses or last minute prescriptions.³⁹

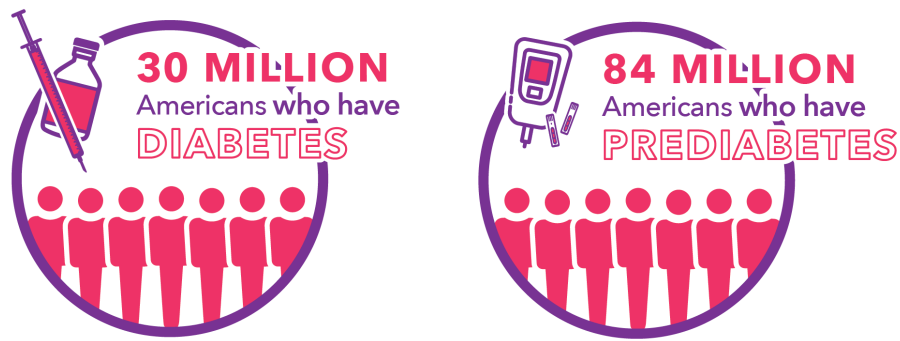
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Diabetes and the Holidays

The increase in expenses during the holiday season is a stressful reality for many Americans. Medication adherence and managing the costs of medications can be challenging during the holiday season for the more than 30 million Americans who have diabetes and the 84 million who have prediabetes.⁴

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85% of Americans overeat during the holidays.²² These overindulgences can throw blood sugar all out of balance. Testing blood glucose levels a little [more than normal](#) might be a good idea for people who are more active than usual or eating different foods at different times than normal.¹⁶



The CDC developed some tips for [managing diabetes](#) to help people with the issue stay on course and successfully get through the maze of parties and pound cakes this holiday season.¹⁰ The tips include elements like bringing their own low-fat dish option to potlucks and other holiday events.

[Other tips](#) aim to focus on friends and family instead of food when getting together.⁶ To keep insulin levels balanced, people with diabetes should eat as close to the usual time as possible, even if it is just a small snack.

Taking these steps during the holidays will not only help to protect against the consequences of overindulgence, but they will also help to protect our holiday budgets.

According to the Health Care Cost Institute, the average person with Type 1 diabetes spent \$18,494 on healthcare expenses in 2016.¹

Likewise, American adults with diabetes report using an average of 5.9 different prescribed medications.¹ With these kinds of expenses tacked onto holiday eating and potentially causing a need for using more medicine and supplies than normal, it's prudent to curb cravings as much as possible.



Health Conditions and Location Relevance

It is undeniable that mental illness, diabetes, and high cholesterol can strike anywhere. However, in the United States, these issues tend to be more concentrated in the South.

Adults who report experiencing the most [mentally unhealthy](#) days tend to be in southern states. For example, people in Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, and South Carolina report more days of mental unhealthiness than in other states.⁹

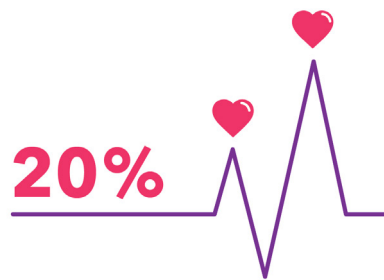
More people experience [diabetes](#) within the southeastern and southwestern states while the prevalence of [high cholesterol](#) is more concentrated in southern and eastern states. In 2014, within states like Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi, 10.5–14.3% of people aged 18 and over were diagnosed with diabetes. In 2015, these same states recorded the highest levels of high cholesterol prevalence (32.6–37.1%).⁹

High Cholesterol and the Holidays

It's not just diabetes that can flare up and wreak havoc on holiday fun.

High cholesterol is also a prominent chronic condition of the holiday season. One study found that compared with May and June, levels of low-density-lipoprotein–LDL or the “bad” cholesterol—were [20%](#) higher when checked in December and January.¹²

LDL cholesterol
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This rise is likely due to holiday [overeating](#) and tendency to indulge in unhealthy foods and neglect exercise during the festive season.¹⁵

For cardiovascular health, some people pay upwards of [\\$4,500 to \\$8,000](#)³⁰ per year for the newer and more costly statins, while others who are taking the standard cholesterol medications spend around [\\$900 to \\$2,000](#)²⁸ per year.

The issue of high cholesterol flare-ups occurring during the holiday season is likely to grow since it is estimated that approximately [40%](#) of Americans will have some form of cardiovascular disease by 2030.²⁵

More and more Americans will need a way to save on these costly, but necessary, medications, especially once the holidays arrive.

Mental Health and the Holidays

Major stressors abound during the holiday season. The stress and anxiety that complement spending the season alone can be as draining as all the planning, purchasing, cooking and cleaning that typically heralds in the winter festivities.

Close to two in five (37%) have suffered from a mental health condition at some point in their life, including 27% who are currently suffering from one today.³⁹

The holiday season can add additional stressors. Over one in three (36%) who currently suffer or have previously suffered from a mental health condition say the holidays would trigger symptoms of their condition.³⁹

The holidays can be a tricky time of year for those
with a mental health issue



OVER ONE IN THREE (36%)

who currently suffer or have previously suffered from a
mental health condition say the holidays
would trigger symptoms of their condition

OVER ONE IN FOUR (28%)

In fact,
say the **holidays are the worst**
time of year **for their condition**



Holiday activities and spending more time with family adds its fair share of weight. Family interactions over the holidays may be anxiety-inducing.

25% of Americans report they struggle with their anxiety when attending family gatherings.



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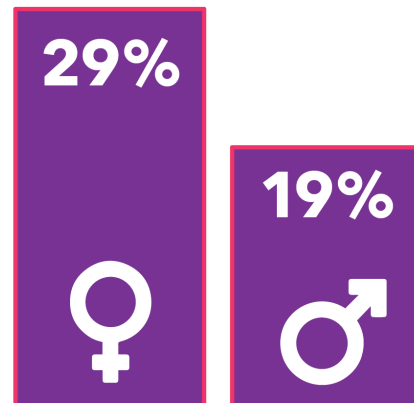
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Women are 52% more likely than men to admit they have challenges with anxiety when at family gatherings.³⁹

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(29% vs. 19%) to say they
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[47%](#) of Americans are “filled with dread” when thinking about the money they’ll spend over the holidays.²²

47%

of Americans are
“FILLED WITH DREAD”
by the prospect of spending
money over the holidays



A 2017 survey by the [American Psychological Association](#) found that 38% of people reported increased stress during the holiday season. These added stressors can have an impact on both our mental health and our budgets.²³

23% of Americans pay for mental health prescriptions each month.¹⁸

Many Americans are searching for ways to save on these prescriptions. Nearly three in 10 have searched for coupons to save money (29%) or compared prices across multiple pharmacies (26%).¹⁸

Gen Z/millennials are 54% more likely than older generations (37% vs. 24%) to have searched for coupons to save money on prescription medication.¹⁸

Holiday Travel & Health

Approximately [26.8 million](#) people travel through American airports during the Thanksgiving holiday season; another 41 million travel during Christmas and New Year's.¹³ In fact, more and more people are traveling during the holidays. The U.S. [Transportation Security Administration](#) expects record numbers of travelers to pass through security during the 2019–2020 holiday season.²⁷

However, holiday travel is stressful not just because of the crowds and rushed timetables as we sprint from place to place to celebrate with family and friends. It's also stressful because we tend to get sick more often during the holiday season.

Traveling raises the chance of [getting sick](#)²⁴ whether it is due to being locked inside an enclosed airplane with a sneezing/coughing seatmate (which increases the chances of getting sick by [80%](#)),³ or falling victim to “[leisure sickness](#),”²⁶ which tends to strike busy professionals who are traveling during the holidays or finally slowing down after a busy year.

Managing Illness During the Holiday Travel Season

Travelers have time to get their flu shots well before the holiday season gets into full swing. For those who procrastinate, getting a flu shot in [early November](#) still leaves time for the vaccination to work before the full festivities begin.²¹

Regardless of when a flu shot is received, the [CDC recommends](#) that all travelers be up-to-date on the vaccine before traveling.⁷

The [CDC](#) also recommends that people with diabetes speak with their doctor before traveling in order to prepare for potential adjustments in insulin doses and to provide prescriptions in cases of losing or running out of medication or supplies.⁵

Additional tips when traveling while sick, with either an acute or more chronic condition, include staying hydrated, keeping hands clean, and fighting airborne germs by wearing a face mask. Staying healthy and free from colds and flu, which can worsen chronic disease flare-ups, helps everyone enjoy the holiday season.

Author Bios:

Holly Phillips, MD, is a Board Certified General Internist in private practice in Manhattan. She addresses all Internal Medicine Conditions, with a focus on preventive women's health. She is an active member of the American Medical Association, the American College of Physicians and the Independent Doctor's Association of New York.

Amy Richardson is a former clinical social worker and health information administrator focused on the creation, production, and dissemination of health information products for national health programs. She received a master's degree in public health from the Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine.

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RxSaver is a free platform that can help you save up to 85% on prescriptions at nearby pharmacies. Simply search for your prescription medication on our website or mobile app, and discover free coupons for pharmacies near you. RxSaver is easy to use and there are no membership fees.