

As doctors, we are very aware of the huge amount of public advice, debate and discussion which is taking place on the approach to relaxing some Covid-19 restrictions this Christmas.

It has clearly not been easy for politicians to strike a balance between lessening social isolation, with its effects on mental health, over Christmas and the inevitable rise in Covid-19 cases in that will occur in January as a result of more social mixing.

Many people will welcome the new temporary guidelines, but others will be apprehensive about the risks of meeting up over Christmas. Whatever risks this decision poses, we do not seek to change it. But we as doctors have a responsibility to help minimise any impact.

We must be honest and say that we have significant concerns about the how this five-day period may impact upon Covid-19 infection rates. Multiple people mixing indoors for prolonged periods of time will lead to an increase in cases. This means more people becoming unwell, being admitted to hospital and, probably, more deaths. But we also know that after the hardest of years, maintaining adherence to existing restrictions will be very difficult for some and therefore unrealistic to expect.

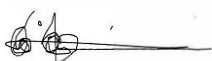
We are also anxious about the impact on the NHS and its staff this winter. January is always an extremely challenging time of year for the NHS, and this time around, we have Covid-19 to add into the mix. There is a risk that the addition of more Covid-19 cases as a result of the easing of restrictions may overwhelm parts of the NHS, whose services are already stretched to their limits.

This has already been a supremely challenging year. Healthcare staff are physically and mentally weary and many of our teams are very worried about how they would cope with a further Covid-19 spike in January.

It is therefore down to every one of us to think very carefully about our plans for those five days.

All we ask, as we have done throughout the pandemic, is that when you make your choices about Christmas, you think of the risk of spreading Covid-19 to your family and to those in vulnerable groups in particular. Please consider very carefully who it is necessary to meet, how long you meet them for and how you can safely do so. Try to minimise crowding, increase ventilation in your homes, wash your hands regularly, observe social distancing and good general hygiene, to further reduce the risks. All of these measures really do make a difference.

Equally, some may feel that with an end in sight, they do not wish to take this risk, this Christmas. With vaccination around the corner we hope this is the last period of major restrictions, and it's so important not to lose the gains we have made these last few weeks.



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