

ENTERTAIN RESPONSIBLY: 12 ways to make small gatherings safer

THIS PAST weekend, I engaged in some daring, fool-hardy behavior.

No, I didn't recklessly speed past a police car, or skydive into the mouth of a volcano. This weekend I now don't judge had friends over for dinner.

Gasp! I know. It's risky, but my husband and I thought it through, as did my friends, another couple who were equally stir crazy. We were consenting adults.

Apart from an occasional family member, D.C. and I hadn't had company to the house in six months. I had started talking to myself, and wearing the same clothes. Zoom book club wasn't enough. I craved live interaction.

Apparently, I'm not alone in my desire to entertain other humans. A July report of outdoor living décor trends from Living Spaces, a California-based furniture retailer, revealed a significant uptick in shopper interest for outdoor furnishings since the pandemic, according to data from Google analytics. Here are some examples comparing interest this July to searches a year ago:

- Adirondack chairs up 21%.
- Hammocks up 25%
- Fire pits up 19%
- Planters up 30%

Explaining the trend, Shelby Greene, Living Spaces stylist, said, "As we adapt to a new way of life that encourages social distancing, outdoor spaces have become the preferred setting for gatherings."

However, even though more people appear to be hosting get-togethers, not all are admitting it publicly for fear of getting *The Look*.

As I searched for ways to entertain outdoors responsibly, I turned to health experts for suggestions. Though all acknowledge that sitting home alone with a mask and a bottle of hand sanitizer is safest,



AT HOME WITH
Marni Jameson

they also concede that low-risk interaction with others is possible, if you're careful.

Now I'm not saying you should or shouldn't have friends over. I am saying, if you are like me and want to gather with a small number of friends, entertain responsibly. To avoid sharing more than your hospitality, here are 12 tips from experts, including the Centers for Disease Control, for hosting a safer get-together:

1. Choose the right guests.

Know where they've been, whether they have knowingly been exposed to the virus, or have any health issues that put them at higher risk. Travelers, the elderly, some health-care workers, and those who have underlying conditions should stay home.

In our case, the other couple had, like us, been living pretty isolated lives and weren't in a risk group.

2. Take it outside.

Fresh air is your friend and a great defense against spreading germs. Risk of transmitting infection goes up indoors. At our evening get-together, we cooked and ate outside.

3. Keep the party small.

Invite no more than a few guests. The number of people you invite isn't as important as the number of households represented. Each house is considered a quarantine unit. The more units, the greater the risk.



Take it outside Since the pandemic has made the outdoors the preferred gathering place, interest in outdoor furnishings, like the Adirondack chairs and fire pit pictured, has been on the rise, a new study shows. *Photo courtesy of Living Spaces*

4. Skip the physical greetings.

As guests come and go, resist the urge to hug, shake hands or high five. Stick to verbal hellos and wave goodbye.

5. Spread out.

Set up seating to allow for social distancing. My husband and I sat next to each other on one side of a wide table, and our friends sat next to each other across from us. A large outdoor ceiling fan kept the air circulating.

6. Eliminate common touch points.

Avoid community anything: No shared serving utensils, no passing condiment bottles or pitchers, and no buffets. For an appetizer, I cut up cheese cubes, and set them on a tray with olives, berries and sliced salami. Everyone had toothpicks, and moved small bites onto their own plants using toothpicks not fingers.

7. Grilling is good.

The heat kills the virus.

When cooking outside, serve food straight off the grill onto guests' plates, eliminating contact with a serving platter.

8. Try BYOF.

Having guests bring their own food, beverages, and utensils further lowers the risk of shared germs.

9. Set up a hand-sanitizing station.

Have disinfecting wipes and hand sanitizer (at least 60% alcohol) available. Or set up soap and paper towels by an outdoor faucet. Encourage guests to wash up before they eat.

10. Revisit the bathroom.

Replace cloth hand towels with paper towels in your guest bath. Stock it with ample soap. Direct guests to take the shortest route from the yard to the bathroom, so they don't have to walk through your house.

Make only one bath available, the one closest to outdoor access. Ask everyone who uses it to wear a mask,

and to turn faucets and door handles using a clean paper towel.

11. Go disposable.

Use paper and plastic goods when practical. Put a trash bag outside where everyone can drop disposable plates and napkins.

12. Cover up.

When not eating or drinking, and when you can't be 6 feet apart, wear masks. Have a few clean masks on hand for guests.

Though the terms of engagement were a little different, we had a lovely dinner party. Everyone felt safe. It was just like new times.

Syndicated columnist Marni Jameson is the author of five home and lifestyle books, including "Downsizing the Family Home - What to Save, What to Let Go" and "Downsizing the Blended Home - When Two Households Become One" (Sterling Publishing, Dec. 2019). Reach her at www.marnijameson.com.