

FORUM

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Christmas Eve on the ward

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How nursing homes and hospitals prepare for Christmas in Corona times

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The answers to these questions are always just a momentary snapshot, because in Corona times rules can change daily. Nevertheless, we asked around in mid-December after the announcement of the renewed lockdown in Germany – and there is indeed some encouraging news on the subject of Christmas in nursing homes and hospitals.

Nina Hundert, the head of social welfare services at the Kaiserswerth nursing home of the Diakonie Düsseldorf, sounds very confident on the phone. The home has come through the pandemic well so far and can therefore make full use of the possibilities offered by the German Corona Protection Order for visits to the nursing home.



Impressions from the Advent season at the Kaiserswerth nursing home of Diakonie Düsseldorf (Photo: Diakonie Düsseldorf)

Two visits per day to the nursing home

"We offer relatives a large visiting time window from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. on all days," explains Ms Hundert. During this time, each resident is allowed a maximum of two visits from two people each, for a total of four people per day. Of course, it is important that the visitors do not show any symptoms. They are registered at the entrance, their body temperature is checked, and the usual rules for masks and distance apply.

In principle, visits to nursing homes are regulated in a similar way throughout Germany, but of course each home must assess its risks individually and can adapt the rules accordingly. A search on the websites of various homes shows that some homes restrict visiting hours on holidays, for example, in order to gain time for Christmas celebrations with the residents. It may well be that on Christmas Eve visits are only possible from 10 am to 12 pm.

The workload in the homes is particularly high right now, so you should not call before each visit if such notification is not required. Many homes inform about current visiting rules on their website. Newsletters for relatives are also part of the service in Kaiserswerth, explains Nina Hundert. Therefore, family members should consult with each other when planning visits and exchange dates and information so that ten nieces and nephews do not suddenly appear at the door on Christmas Eve.



Impressions from the Advent season at the Kaiserswerth nursing home of Diakonie Düsseldorf (Photo: Diakonie Düsseldorf)

Strict rules in the hospital

Visiting rules in hospitals are far more restrictive than in nursing homes. When we spoke to Mario Ohl on the phone at the beginning of December, one of the geriatric ward managers at the Evangelical Hospital in Enger, Germany, he was still optimistic about the holidays: the elderly patients should at least be allowed to receive one visitor per day. The prerequisite, however, was that the number of new infections per 100,000 inhabitants in the Herford district did not exceed 150, as agreed by the hospitals of the district. However, this was the case shortly afterwards, and the hospital announced a ban on visits on its website. Whichever German hospital website you open, the words "visitor stop" and "visitor ban" literally jump out at you in big red letters. However, many hospitals also announce exceptions, e.g. for critically ill patients – in this case, relatives should consult the ward manager. Otherwise, you can leave fresh pyjamas and lovingly wrapped gifts in closed bags at the entrance so that the patients can experience a little Christmas joy.

At the Diakonie nursing home in Kaiserswerth, a lot of emphasis is placed on Christmas cheer even in times of the pandemic. For example, at the church service: although the home's impressive church cannot be used at the moment, as all residents would have to move through a single living area on the first floor to gain access – impossible in Corona times. "But we will celebrate a church service in our inner courtyard on 23 December," says Ms Hundert. "The pastor designs the service to be open air, and the residents participate on the balconies of their living units." This concept has already proven very successful in the past weeks.

Roasted almonds for all the senses

In the inner courtyard, residents can also enjoy the sight of a nativity scene and a festive fire bowl. In the living areas, roasted almonds were prepared during Advent to stimulate all the senses. A Christmas feature in the house newspaper conveyed heartfelt greetings from Kaiserswerth's associations and businesses. And of course Christmas Eve is also celebrated, not as usual with the entire home community, but in a cosy atmosphere in the different living units.

Relatives, who were usually welcome, are not allowed to join in the celebrations this time for safety reasons. But what if mother and daughter would like to look at the festively lit Christmas tree together? What if it could be the last Christmas?

Even then there is a solution: relatives can take the residents in Kaiserswerth home for six hours without any problems. The home appeals to all involved to observe the distance and protection rules. A longer stay is also possible, but then the resident must be quarantined after his/her return.

As difficult and sad as this Advent season may feel, the examples show that there is often a way to connect infection control and personal encounters. And when there isn't, the telephone, video calls or a heartfelt wave from the street through the window must ensure that the connection remains. The power of love and good thoughts does not stop Corona.