

The Goof-Proof Guide to Holiday Entertaining

Planning a party? Coach Sandy's countdown calendar will help you pull off the perfect event—without pulling out your hair.

Whether it's a simple cocktail party or a lavish five-course feast, entertaining friends and family in your home is one of the delights of the holiday season. But don't kid yourself: It takes a lot of planning. That's something many people with ADD have a hard time doing. Fortunately, a time line can keep all the preparations on track—and keep you from becoming overwhelmed.

Three weeks before the big day

- Plan the menu, including appetizers, entrée, side dishes, and dessert. Ideally, you'll choose appetizers and desserts that can be prepared a day or two in advance. Aim for no more than two dishes that require last-minute preparation (gravy counts as one of them).
- If you plan on having a fresh turkey, place the order with your butcher now.
- Place all the recipes you will be using in a folder, and make a shopping list.
- If your guests will be bringing dishes, confirm with them what they'll bring.
- Look up the prep and cooking time required for each dish you'll be serving, and create a schedule for meal preparation. Make sure you have enough kitchen timers, burners, and oven and refrigerator space.
- Check with out-of-town guests about their travel and accommodation plans. You don't need a last-minute call from the airport when you're in the middle of cooking.
- Convene a family meeting to divvy up tasks. Account for everything. Who will watch the children? Who'll pick up guests at the airport? Clean the house? Shop? Decorate? Set the table? Keep

people out of the kitchen, so they don't get gravy on their clothes? And, most important, when?

One week before

- Buy all non-perishable or frozen items on your list.
- Don't forget to buy paper products, beverages, ice, and decorations. To avoid crowded stores, refrain from shopping on Saturday or Sunday. Go early in the morning or late in the evening on a weekday.
- Clean the house and put up decorations.
- Get the guest room ready with fresh linens.
- If you're having homemade cranberry sauce, make it now. (Yes, it can be prepared a week ahead of time.)

Four days before

- Start defrosting your turkey in the refrigerator.
- Polish the silverware. Wash the china and serving trays.

Three days before

- Shop for fresh fruits, vegetables, and other perishables.

Two days before

- Prepare the dishes that can be made in advance and refrigerated until the day of the party. (Cheesecakes, soups, and sauces are among the dishes that can be prepared two days in advance.)

One day before

- Bake cakes, pies, and cookies.
- Make stuffing and store it in the refrigerator.
- Prepare casseroles that can be baked the next day.
- Pick up flowers and deli items.
- Set the table.
- Fill coolers with ice. Clear space in the refrigerator for chilling soft drinks and other beverages.

The big day

- Make sure everyone in the family is ready to tackle his or her to-do list.
- Allow at least five hours for meal preparation. Refer to the schedule you prepared three weeks earlier.
- Set out appetizers with an eye toward "steering" guests to where you want them.
- Stuff the turkey while the oven preheats for 20 minutes.
- Leave 30 minutes for the turkey to cool before carving. (This is the time to make the gravy.) Carving the turkey takes about 15 minutes.

*** **When the meal is over and it's time to clean up, don't wave off offers from your guests to pitch in and help. It's a good way for them to show their thanks—and the opportunity for you to put your feet up and bask in the satisfaction of a job well done.**

