NEXT FOR AUTISM

HOW-TO GUIDE

THANKSGIVING HOSTING GUIDE

This guide is a menu, not a rulebook. Pick what helps and skip the rest.

> When you're ready to plan, use the companion **Thanksgiving Hosting Planner** for checklists and fill-in pages.

You can host a great Thanksgiving by designing it around how your brain and body work best.

Many autistic hosts bring real strengths to a gathering: **careful planning, attention to detail, honesty, and a talent for creating calm, predictable spaces.**

1 PICK A FORMAT THAT FITS YOU

The right gathering is the one you can enjoy, not the biggest one you can manage. Compare a few options:

Small dinner

2–6 people. Best if you like deeper one-on-one talk.

ENERGY: LOW TO MEDIUM

Potluck

Best if you want to share the cooking work.

ENERGY: LOW TO MEDIUM

Dessert and drinks

Best if you want a short, simple event.

ENERGY: LOW

Time-boxed meal

2–3 hours. Best if you want a clear start and end.

ENERGY: MEDIUM

Co-host

Best if you want a partner for tasks or talking.

ENERGY: MEDIUM

Open house

Drop in, drop out. Best if smaller groups feel easier.

ENERGY: MEDIUM TO HIGH

TIP A walk outside before or after the meal is a great option if movement or nature helps you feel calm.

2 MAKE THE FOOD SIMPLER

You don't have to cook everything from scratch. Choose one approach that fits your energy:

PICK AN APPROACH

- **A** **Make one, buy the rest.** Cook your favorite; buy sides and dessert.
- **B** **Potluck with a plan.** Assign sides, desserts, and drinks.
- **C** **Ready-made meal.** Many grocery stores sell full meals. Order early.
- **D** **Swap the turkey.** A rotisserie chicken or a dish you know well works too.
- **E** **Make-ahead menu.** Choose foods you can make 1–2 days early.

TIPS THAT HELP

- Include at least one food you know you'll want to eat. **Your safe foods belong at your party too.**
- Tape a numbered recipe list near the stove.
- Set a timer for every dish so you don't have to track them in your head.
- Label each dish with its name and any allergens.
- Serve buffet style to skip passing plates.

3 SET UP YOUR SPACE FOR SENSORY COMFORT

Your home is your space, so set it up in a way that keeps you regulated. **A calm space often helps guests too.**

LIGHT	Use lamps instead of overhead lights. Try candles or string lights, and skip flashing décor.
SOUND	Keep music low or off and skip the TV in the main room. Rugs and cloth napkins soften noise. Keep earplugs handy for you.
SMELL	Skip scented candles and air fresheners. Open a window or use the stove fan while cooking.
TOUCH	Wear your most comfortable clothes and keep a fidget in your pocket.
SPACE	Spread seating out and set up a second room for smaller conversations.

4 MAKE A RECHARGE SPOT

Pick one room or corner just for breaks: **a bedroom, porch, or even your car.** Stock it with:

- **A blanket**
- **Water**
- **A snack**
- **Headphones**
- **A phone charger**
- **A comfort item**

TIP You can step away for 5–10 minutes any time. **A break is part of the plan, not a failure.**

5 SET CLEAR EXPECTATIONS WITH GUESTS

Clear details up front mean fewer surprises for everyone. **Pick an invite script and make it your own:**

SIMPLE

> *You're invited to Thanksgiving at my place on Thursday, Nov. 26, from 2–5 pm. Could you bring a side or dessert?*

WITH AN END TIME

> *Dinner is 3–6 pm. I'm keeping it cozy and wrapping up at 6 so we can all rest.*

SHARING WHAT HELPS YOU

> *I'm autistic, and a few things help me host well: a set end time, lower noise, and short breaks. If I step out, I'm just recharging.*

ASKING ABOUT NEEDS

> *Any food allergies or foods you avoid? Is there anything that would make you more comfortable?*

6 PROTECT YOUR SOCIAL ENERGY

Structure gives everyone something to do and **takes pressure off small talk.**

BUILT-IN ACTIVITIES

- A gratitude jar to read at dessert
- Board games, cards, or a puzzle
- The parade or football for side-by-side time
- A short walk after the meal
- A job for anyone who wants one

CONVERSATION STARTERS

> *What food do you look forward to every year?*

> *What's something you're into right now?*

> *What's the best thing that happened to you this fall?*

SCRIPTS FOR BREAKS AND BOUNDARIES

STEPPING AWAY	*"I'm going to take a quick break. Help yourselves to more food."*
CHANGING THE TOPIC	*"I'd rather not get into that today. Who wants pie?"*
ASKING FOR QUIET	*"Could we turn the music down a bit? Thanks!"*
ENDING THE EVENT	*"This has been so nice. I'm going to start wrapping up. Let me pack you some leftovers."*
TURNING DOWN HELP	*"Thanks, I've got a system going. You could grab the drinks, though!"*

TIP You don't have to memorize these. **Write your favorites on a card or in your phone notes.**

7 IF IT STARTS TO FEEL LIKE TOO MUCH

Noticing early signs gives you more choices. Signs might include:

- **Feeling irritable**
- **Losing words**
- **Sounds getting louder**
- **Wanting to hide**

QUICK RESET PLAN

1. **Say your break line:** "Be right back."
2. **Go to your recharge spot.**
3. **Lower input:** headphones, dim light, close your eyes.
4. **Do one thing that helps:** breathe, stim, sip cold water, or have a snack.
5. **Check in:** Do I need 5 more minutes, help, or to end early?
6. **Come back when you're ready,** or let your helper take over.

PLAN B IS ALLOWED

- Ask a co-host to run the rest of the meal.
- **End early:** *"I'm running low on energy, so I'm going to call it a night. Thank you all for coming."*
- Set up a code word with a trusted person that means **"please help me wrap things up."**

8 AFTER: REST AND RECOVER

Recovery time is part of hosting. Leave the dishes for tomorrow if you need to, block off quiet time the next day, and do something low-energy you enjoy.

REMINDER

You don't have to mask or perform to be a great host.

Plan in ways that lower your stress, ask for what you need, and remember: **being autistic is a strength.** Your care, honesty, and attention to detail can make a gathering feel welcoming for everyone. And rest afterward is part of the plan.