

Grown-Ups Guide

For a Healthier, Happier Halloween

Dr. Jan Gurley is an internal medicine physician and a public health leader working in the San Francisco Department of Public Health's COVID-19 emergency response, writing many guidances for ways to be safer during COVID-19. She is also a mother, and big fan of Halloween. The opinions represented below are her own.

In medicine and behavior change science, we know that when we try to take steps to be healthier, it doesn't help to focus on the bad. A feeling of being deprived can undermine efforts to eat healthier, and more generally undermine our efforts to avoid things we know may not be the best for our health.

After the CDC and other reputable public health groups have determined that Trick or Treating is a high-risk activity and should be discouraged, Halloween trick-or-treating may be feeling like another loss to many families during this pandemic.

Staying safer and making healthier choices can be easier if we can find a way to focus on the positive. Planning ahead and being creative can help, both for ourselves and our families. We all want a safer, healthier, happier Halloween. We especially want to avoid a surge of infections and deaths arriving around four weeks later, around Thanksgiving.

In an effort to provide another fun healthier and happier options for families, and to be more inclusive for families who may have struggled with door-to-door trick-or-treating even before the pandemic due to mobility issues or sickness, Dr. Jan Gurley wrote a children's story, called [Tw](#)as the Week Before Halloween. Dr. Gurley wrote the story at night after her days working in the COVID-19 emergency response. Her daughter, Almost-Dr. Amelia Gurley, illustrated it after working days and nights during her Pediatric Emergency Medicine rotation as a 4th year medical student at Brown University's Alpert Medical School.

The story and illustration are available as a free download, and please feel free to share them widely. Please give credit, and do not use for commercial gain. You can download and print a free [two-page version](#) of the story (<http://www.pressforchange.com/week-before-halloween-2-page/>), or a [one-page version](#) (best printed on 11 by 14 inch paper - <http://www.pressforchange.com/week-before-halloween-1-page/>), and color it in as a fun Halloween activity. You will be asked for your email address, and your information will not be shared. The story also will be available as an e-book for families to purchase and have at home to read, and any proceeds for Dr. Gurley from the sale of the 2020 book are donated.

In addition to trying to help frame Halloween in a way that is more joyful and positive, it is important to have concrete steps people can take to stay safer, no matter how they choose to celebrate. Please see below or go to for the [Grown Ups Guide](#) to a happier, healthier Halloween (<http://www.pressforchange.com/week-before-halloween-grownup-guide/>).

Tips For Being Safer this Halloween:

Prepare for Indoor Fun!

Plan Ahead - Be sure to plan ahead for your family. Uncertainty, by itself, can be stressful. Holiday pressure is intense, and sometimes it can be hard to remember that you are the parent! Messaging early and often about the plan for the night can help many children dealing with anxiety.

Make It Fun! – Instead of emphasizing what is not being allowed, or done, emphasize the new and exciting.

Be aware of social stressors – if possible, find out if your school or faith-based organization or neighborhood is planning a virtual celebration for kids who are opting to stay in. For children who might enjoy it, think about reading the story called [Twas the Week Before Halloween](#) (see above for more info about your [free downloadable copies](#)). Halloween celebrations of all kinds can connect virtually, including by phone. For other options, keep an eye on social media to see if there might be a celebration that fits for your family that night. Virtual celebrating with others is a great way to deal with pressures if your family has decided to stay indoors.

Be flexible – Yes, it's true that it seems like a contradiction to say both "Plan Ahead" and "Be Flexible"! Even if you think your family may choose to go door-to-door, you may realize as the day approaches that it no longer feels safe. Or that someone is not feeling well and may be getting sick. Or that the tempests of this year (fire! storms! wildfire smoke!) are going to make it really difficult. Or maybe you don't feel good about avoiding grandparents for two weeks afterward, especially if you are celebrating Dia de Los Muertos/Day of the Dead so soon after Halloween.

In case any of those might turn out to be the case for you or your family, stay flexible by being positive about all options, and by preparing, just in case your family realizes that they may want to stay in. This year has brought many challenges to families and trying to find some joy and positivity is an important part of self-care. Reading your free download of [Twas the Week Before Halloween](#) and then staying home means you could make 2020 the Origin Year of a possible tradition going forward. You can tell people you participated the first year it first started.

Here are some of the safest Halloween celebration options:

- 1) Reading Halloween-themed stories out loud
- 2) Decorating masks
- 3) Decorating a space in your home as a "haunted house"
- 4) Closet-door trick-or-treating
- 5) Shadow play with a light, including inside a pillow fort
- 6) Watching a Halloween-themed or, if age appropriate, horror movie
- 7) Dressing up and staying in character at home
- 8) Playing board games
- 9) Watching live online or streamed or televised Halloween events
- 10) Acting out a murder mystery or a role-playing game
- 11) Having a virtual costume parade with family and friends
- 12) Go on a drive to see decorations

Handing Out Treats, Or Not?

Staying in for Halloween night is one decision. The next decision is whether or not you will be answering the door and handing out treats. The safest option is to stay in and **not** answer the door. But if you choose to hand out treats, here are some tips for how to be safer.

Good advice for preventing COVID-19 stays the same for this, as with other activities. Outdoors is better than indoors. Everyone should wear a mask, particularly when mixing with others, especially when you cannot guarantee staying six feet apart at all times. Wash or disinfect hands often, and do not pass or share objects without washing/disinfecting hands between touching a shared object. So how does that work for giving out candy?

Here are some practical tips, ranging from simple to more complex:

- 1) Put candy out spread out in a single layer on a flat piece of cardboard or a cookie sheet. Do not use a deep bowl, where people will be pawing through a deep bowl touching many treats that others will touch afterward.
- 2) Put your flat, single layer of treats up above waist height – maybe on a recycling bin, or on the trunk of your car in front of your house, or a stable folding table. You do not want a situation where a crowd of toddlers are bending over, heads together, handling and grabbing treats. Put treats high enough up where people who are old enough to understand hand sanitizing will pick them up for the members of their household.
- 3) Mark off the path or sidewalk to your door to show where to stand six feet apart, maybe with blue tape, or a chalk ghost outline. People really respond if we help them organize themselves to be safer.
- 4) When answering your door to trick-or-treaters, it is best to keep people six feet back from your door. Otherwise you can open it and find yourself face to face with others. Spread a fake spiderweb or a caution tape across the pathway or stairs to your door to stop people from approaching closer than six feet from your door, then stand at your open door to give out treats.
- 5) Wash your hands before handling treats, and after any time you touch your face, cough, or sneeze. Wear a mask. Do not shout, and discourage others from shouting, even while wearing a mask. Shouting, shrieking, and singing all increase the spread of droplets.
- 6) Be extremely careful if you want to set up a fan that blows out your door. You may be blowing droplets from one person to the next. If you wish to do this, be sure to set up the fan in a way that blows across the doorway opening, instead of straight out. Otherwise you could be blowing virus droplets along a line of people waiting, even if they are separated.
- 7) You can put up a sign on your door asking people to ring or knock and then back up to a marked place six feet away from your doorway.
- 8) Encourage yourself in advance to feel empowered to not open your door or respond to a doorbell or knock if a situation feels unsafe.
- 9) If you want to get creative, consider setting up a tube shoot to send candy down to people. Do not use a slingshot – who wants to have to go to the ER during a pandemic because of an eye injury? That would be terrible (and who wants a lawsuit over an eye injury?). Also try to avoid improvised treat-delivery systems that require you to touch things that many other people are touching – like toy electric cars. If you do, disinfect and wash hands frequently. Or slide it down to people or toss it gently.

- 10) Avoid a Trunk or Treat which also requires people to bend over, heads together, and reach in to get treats out of a trunk. Place treats flat in a single layer – go ahead and pour them on a flat lid of your trunk instead.
- 11) Consider a porch party with other families where you deliver treats secretly to parents in the days before Halloween, and you open them on Halloween night.

FAQs

I am already struggling with online school and my job. You say “make it fun” like that is actually possible. Help?

I so wish I could hug you right now. Since I can't, here are ideas in addition to the tips above:

- 1) Have your kids decorate a Bunker Box (click here to get a free download of [Twas the Week Before Halloween](#))
- 2) Get a mixture of candy or even non-sugary treat(s) and play Trick or Treat Hide and Seek
- 3) Record a family Elder/grandparent/distant beloved relative reading [Twas the Week Before Halloween](#) story, and play it for your kids
- 4) Keep an eye out for virtual fun events on Halloween night to do
- 5) Plan a bunch of activities for that night (see also the list, above), even if you typically do them before Halloween day – pumpkin-carving, creating costumes, doing Halloween crafts.

I don't even have kids but this [Twas the Week Before Halloween](#) sounds like fun - what can I do?

Who said this was only for kids? Join in!

- 1) Be a Bunker! (see the story [Twas the Week Before Halloween](#). If you know kids locally who may be left out on Halloween, consider – with permission – doing a porch run and dropping off a treat bag.
- 2) Be a Bunker from afar by mailing in advance a treat bag to kids in your circle who would welcome it.
- 3) Draw and post your own version of Hope O-ween, her friends, and Bunker in [Twas the Week Before Halloween](#) story, maybe for a different population, or an older crowd?
- 4) Read aloud [Twas the Week Before Halloween](#) with your own take on it and post it online!
- 5) Fan fic the daylight out of [Twas the Week Before Halloween](#).

What if *some* of my kids go door-to-door and *some* stay in? Does that help reduce our risk for COVID-19?

It can be hard to remember that your household is one unit when it comes to COVID-19. You share the riskiest behavior with *all* of your household – with everyone who shares indoor air and touch. Splitting your family into different risks for Halloween may be a decision you make, but it is important to realize that the highest risk of everyone's behavior is shared. The safest approach, particularly if you have people who may be at higher risk, is to stay indoors. You can make it more fun, particularly for younger kids, by celebrating Hope-o-ween and Playing Bunker indoors (see the story [Twas the Week Before Halloween](#)). This is especially true if you live with people who are at higher risk, or if you may be seeing older family members or others at higher risk for Dia de los Muertos/Day of the Dead right after Halloween, or at any time in the next two weeks.