

Navigating holiday parties as a nurse can be tough. If you've been to a holiday party, cocktail party—or let's face it—pretty much any kind of party, when someone finds out what you do for a living, the questions begin... “Can you look at this mole?” “This rash—do you think I should see a doctor?” “I think I have a boil on my butt...”

Well, we hope that last one hasn't happened! But even if it has, we've got some ways for you to navigate holiday parties and deal with it all properly and professionally, all while encouraging people to be proactive about their own health. **Ilene Schwartz, RN, LNC**, of Pegalis Law Group, LLC, has encountered this a number of times. “Family, coworkers, even strangers at parties have started telling me about their symptoms or ailments! It's that ‘Oh, you are a nurse! Can I ask you something...’ As soon as I hear those words, I know it is personal. They want a diagnosis, or sometimes directions on what test to get! Sometimes it's about their medication. ‘Can you JUST look in my throat?’ or ‘Does my leg seem swollen to you?’” says Schwartz. “It's easy to stop for a second and think – uh oh, here I am off duty, dressed up, trying to enjoy the day. But it is also an opportunity to reinforce what we know — that it is better to check than be sorry. I won't and can't give a medical opinion in those instances, but I am quick to offer advice on how they can and should investigate the symptom.”

Schwartz suggests that when people say these kinds of things to you, you be kind and say something like, “I don't want to steer you wrong, and this isn't the best place for an accurate medical discussion. But here is what I can tell you—it's not worth guessing on anything that does not feel or look right to you. Always trust your gut!” In addition, Schwartz says, “I would suggest that they see their dermatologist, primary care physician, cardiologist, etc. as soon as they can.”

One of the reasons why people do this to nurses at holiday parties is because they can sometimes listen better at a casual event than they would do at the ER or in a medical setting, Schwartz says. “So while it is impossible to give a diagnosis at a party, it is an excellent opportunity for caring nurses to potentially save someone from medical errors. Remind them that as patients, we *all* need to be proactive—to not to leave things to chance, to always go to the doctor with an updated list *for them* of their meds and supplements, and recent symptoms and concerns. These become part of your chart/medical records. I remind them that all medical pros can make mistakes, and they need to respectfully ask questions and get second opinions. I have no problem saying that.”

When she's encouraging people to become more active about their health care, Schwartz also gives them practical advice: “They have to expect and accept the limits on their time with health care professionals. To expect it means to study before you go to the doctor, to have your questions written out, to know your symptoms, when they started, what makes them worse or better,” says Schwartz. “It is ideal to bring a non-emotional person with them who is a good listener to take notes for them, when they have a serious diagnosis. Don't just bring a bunch of people with you for moral support. Bring one good person who can pay attention and be your advocate when you are too upset or sick to do so.”

Finally, Schwartz tells them that being proactive is crucial. Being proactive “includes really preparing for your doctor's appointments, asking about screening and tests, asking for copies of lab results, keeping a health care diary and your records. Generally, treat your health like any important project, not one you will just hand over to someone else, but a project you will be involved closely with every step of the way. There is no more important a project than your own health and people have been lulled into thinking ‘other’ people will take care of the details,” she says. **For tips on encouraging others to be proactive about their health, visit [here](#).**