A Thanksgiving guide for clinicians

Rehearsing Thanksgiving: Holiday ADLs for Immersive Therapy Sessions

Neuromersive | November 2026



72.9 million

Americans expected to travel by car over the 2026 Thanksgiving period

AAA

321%

more home cooking fires on Thanksgiving 2024 than on an average day

National Fire Protection Association

50%

pooled estimate of stroke survivors who experience fatigue

Cummingetal.

The Thanksgiving Day ADL Map at a Glance

Stage	Holiday tasks	What they demand	Practice in session
Getting ready	Showering, brushing teeth and toileting, often in a relative's home (ADLs)	Task sequencing, standing balance, safety awareness in an unfamiliar bathroom	Life Sim Showering, Oral Hygiene, and Toileting
Before the meal	Grocery shopping, paying at the register, driving or riding to a family home (IADLs)	Visual scanning, reaching, holding a list in mind, handling money, hazard perception	Retail Therapy for money-handling scenarios, and Driving Sim
Making the meal	Meal preparation and cooking (IADL)	Sequencing steps, safe appliance use, reaching, sitting or standing balance	Life Sim Cooking, and Fowl Play for standing balance
At the table	Transfers, eating, passing dishes, conversation, asking for help (ADLs and social participation)	Sit-to-stand, sitting balance, reaching across a table, walking while talking	Lunchtime Adventure, Life Sim and Pop It for social scenarios
After the meal	Clearing up, laundry, a game of catch, a quiet break, the trip home (ADLs and IADLs)	Balance while carrying, reaching and timing, endurance, managing fatigue	Life Sim Laundry, Play Ball, Relaxation Station and Haven Guided Breathing

A Holiday Built From Daily Living Tasks

Formany patients, the first Thanksgiving after a stroke, injury or hospital stay is the first time several demanding tasks land on the same day. Shopping, traveling, cooking, sitting through a long meal, talking in a crowded room and cleaning up are all familiar activities, yet a holiday asks for them back to back with little room to rest between them.

Rehabilitation teams usually sort these tasks into two groups, basic and instrumental activities of daily living. Basic activities (ADLs) cover personal care such as bathing, dressing, toileting and functional mobility, while instrumental activities (IADLs) draw on several cognitive processes at once, as in food preparation and medication management (Buele et al.).

Thanksgiving follows a predictable order that patients and families can plan around. The Smart Therapy Complete Solution maps onto that order well. Its library holds more than 35 activities across upper extremity, lower extremity, balance, cognitive, pain, vestibular and ADL categories, usable with patients seated, standing or in elevated supine ("Activities"). The Life Sim scenarios fit the holiday most closely, covering cooking, laundry, showering, oral hygiene, toileting and functional reaching ("Activities"). Because the therapist sees the patient's view on a tablet and adjusts difficulty in real time, a session can be shaped around the specific tasks a patient's holiday will include.

Getting Ready: Self-Care Before the Guests Arrive

The holiday starts well before the meal, with showering, brushing teeth and using the bathroom. Many patients will do these tasks in a relative's home, where the bathroom layout, grab points and lighting are all unfamiliar. These basic ADLs ask for task sequencing, balance and safety awareness, often when the patient is already tired from travel. The Life Sim self-care scenarios let patients rehearse a full shower routine, brushing teeth with step-by-step prompts and toileting tasks, with a focus on sequencing, safety and body awareness ("Activities"). Because the therapist sees the same view on the tablet, a missed step or an unsteady reach shows up during practice instead of on the holiday itself.

Before the Meal: Shopping, Paying and Getting There

Grocery shopping is an IADL that combines visual scanning, reaching, walking and remembering a list, often in a store far busier than usual before a holiday. In a pilot study, four stroke survivors who trained in a virtual supermarket for three weeks then improved by 20.5 to 51.2 percent on most measures of a real-mall errands test (Rand et al.). Retail Therapy brings similar practice into the headset, with patients navigating a virtual store, scanning shelves, making decisions and managing a shopping list ("Activities"). An occupational therapist at Texas NeuroRehab Center's post-acute brain injury program described the grocery store activity as a way to address visual scanning, reaching outside the base of support and task endurance ("Texas NeuroRehab Center"). She also noted that the store setting itself is a key part of the practice. The team also discussed how a shopping task can target executive function skills such as memory, attention and information processing, the same skills a holiday shopping list demands ("Texas NeuroRehab Center").

Holiday shopping ends at the register, and paying is an IADL in its own right. A Neuromersive case study followed a high school transition program for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Students reported their strongest confidence gains in handling money and grocery shopping, the skills most directly practiced in their immersive scenarios (Neuromersive).

Getting to the meal is a task of its own for many families this week. AAA expects 81.5 million Americans to travel at least 50 miles from home over the 2026 Thanksgiving period, with 72.9 million, or nearly 90 percent, traveling by car ("AAA: Thanksgiving Travel"). In a randomized trial of 83 people with a first stroke, 73 percent of simulator-trained participants who completed the

official fitness-to-drive assessment passed, compared with 42 percent of the control group (Akinwuntan et al.). Driving Sim is designed for ADL independence assessment and cognitive readiness evaluation ("Activities"). Patients practice spotting a hazard, such as a car ahead or a deer crossing the road, and stopping in time. This practice complements a formal driving evaluation rather than replacing it.

Making the Meal: The Kitchen

Meal preparation is one of the most demanding IADLs a holiday brings. It asks a patient to sequence several steps, keep their balance while sitting or standing, reach for items and track more than one dish at a time. Kitchens also carry extra risk on this holiday, and Thanksgiving 2024 saw an estimated 1,139 home cooking fires, a 321 percent increase over the daily average, according to the National Fire Protection Association ("Thanksgiving Top Day"). Unattended cooking is the leading factor in these fires ("Thanksgiving Top Day"), so for a patient with attention or memory changes, tracking the stove may be harder than any motor step in the recipe.

Virtual kitchens have been studied as a way to see this kind of performance before a patient tries it at home. One study asked 54 people with traumatic brain injury to complete a multi-step meal preparation task in an immersive virtual kitchen and in an actual kitchen (Zhang et al.). Performance in the virtual kitchen correlated with performance in the real one ($r = .63$) and predicted how participants did in the real kitchen assessment (Zhang et al.). Life Sim Cooking walks patients through step-by-step prompts to prepare a steak, targeting task sequencing, safe appliance use and functional reaching ("Activities"). Watching the same view on the tablet, the therapist can notice missed steps, hesitations or balance changes as they happen. For the standing a long stretch at the counter asks for, Fowl Play adds balance practice in a fast-paced barnyard game built for fall prevention ("Activities").

At the Table: Seating, Reaching and Conversation

A holiday meal can keep a patient seated for an hour or more, and it starts and ends with sit-to-stand transfers from dining chairs that may not have armrests. Between those transfers come sitting balance, reaching across the table, passing dishes and eating, each of which asks for steady trunk control. Immersive therapy can address this work even before a patient is able to stand. One therapist using the Smart Therapy Complete Solution described patients working on trunk control, sitting balance and everyday activities from wheelchair level ("Ignite Medical Resorts"). Lunchtime Adventure, a simulated dining experience for ADL independence, dementia care and cognitive support, puts that practice in a mealtime setting ("Activities"). Life Sim Pop It adds reaching, leaning and weight shifting, the movements a patient uses to reach across a crowded table ("Activities").

Conversation adds a second layer of demand, especially when a patient walks between rooms full of family. In a study of 63 stroke survivors living in the community, 26 stopped walking when a conversation began, and 16 of those 26 fell during the following six months (Hyndman and Ashburn). The therapist stays beside the patient during an immersive session, which makes it easy to add conversation to a balance activity or a trip through Retail Therapy. Holiday tables also call for social skills, from asking someone to pass a dish to joining a conversation with relatives. In the same transition program case study, students' confidence in socially complex scenarios, such as asking for help, grew across their immersive sessions (Neuromersive).

After the Meal: Cleanup, Games and the Trip Home

Cleanup brings the Life Sim scenarios back into play for the end of the day. Life Sim Laundry has patients wash, dry and fold in a simulated laundry room, with a focus on task sequencing and safety (“Activities”). A therapist at Ignite Medical Resorts described patients preparing to return home independently who worked on balance and laundry tasks in the Life Simulator. She noted that those patients came back the next day asking to do it again (“Ignite Medical Resorts”). Laundry practice connects directly to holiday cleanup, when tablecloths, napkins and kitchen towels all need washing, folding and carrying.

Many families end the meal with a game of catch or a little football in the yard. Play Ball, a game of reaching, throwing and catching that targets upper extremity function, shoulder mobility and balance, gives patients practice for a backyard game with grandchildren (“Activities”). The occupational therapist at Texas NeuroRehab Center described the catching activity as a fun way to address meaningful occupations (“Texas NeuroRehab Center”).

Fatigue often decides how the end of the day goes, and it is common after stroke, with a meta-analysis estimating a pooled prevalence of 50 percent among stroke survivors (Cumming et al.). As a holiday approaches, clinicians can gradually lengthen immersive sessions and watch the accuracy, reaction time and difficulty history on the tablet for signs of fading performance, which tells families when to plan a break. When a full house gets loud, Relaxation Station and Haven Guided Breathing give patients practice with calming routines, such as paced box breathing, that families can encourage during a quiet break (“Activities”).

Preparing Patients and Families

Rehearsing holidayADLs givescliniciansa clearer picture before the day arrives, and the system’s Plan, Deliver, Measure, Document workflow fits that preparation well. A holiday-focused session can be planned around the tasks a patient’s day will include, delivered as immersive practice, measured on the tablet and documented for the care team.

That picture is most useful when it reaches families, through a short conversation before the holiday about which tasks the patient handled well in session, which still need help, and where breaks belong. That conversation turns session practice into a plan the household can follow, adapted to each patient’s plan of care.

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From all of us at Neuromersive, happy Thanksgiving to the clinicians who help patients get home for the holidays.

Learn more about the Smart Therapy Complete Solution at neuromersive.com, email info@neuromersive.com, or call (855) 589-8326.