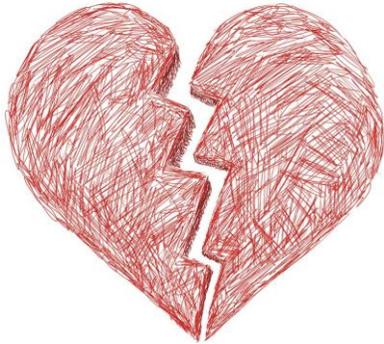


# Studies show couples wait until after the holidays to divorce, with filings peaking in March

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By Tim Grant / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

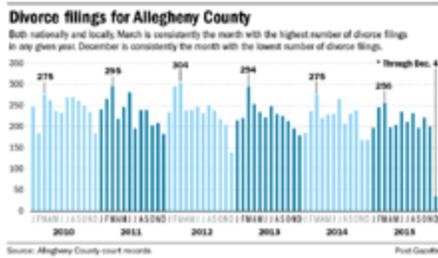
It is not uncommon for married couples to take their children on vacation over Christmas, stay in the same hotel rooms and behave as though everything were normal — only to announce at the beginning of the new year they are getting a divorce, according to professionals who handle divorces.

“I have seen many situations where couples decide to get through the holidays and not disrupt this season for their children and then do the marital split in the new year,” said Lisa Turbeville, a divorce financial analyst and owner of Watermark Financial in Mt. Lebanon.

When it comes to divorce filings, December has historically been the calm before the storm that makes landfall in January, and reaches its peak, both nationally and locally, in March.

Allegheny County court records dating from January 2010 to December 2015 find the month of December consistently has had the lowest number of divorce filings, and March has consistently had the highest.

The Egan, Minn.-based legal information website [FindLaw.com](http://FindLaw.com) in 2012 declared March as “Divorce Month” after analyzing filings across the U.S. between 2008 and 2011 with Westlaw, a legal research database. The analysis revealed divorces spike in January, continue to rise, and then peak in late March.



**PG graphic: Divorce filings for Allegheny County**  
*(Click image for larger version)*

Pittsburgh family law attorney Robin Frank with the Downtown law firm Raphael, Ramsden & Behers said the March madness has as much to do with family finances as with family dynamics.

“When people come to an attorney’s office, they typically have to pay a retainer fee to engage their services,” she said. “With holiday spending in December, people tend to prioritize expenses with gifts for family and friends and holiday gatherings. After the holidays, they have a chance to recoup their savings and pay the retainer fee for an attorney.”

Ms. Turbeville said the three-month period after December also is when husbands and wives are taking time to choose their divorce lawyers. They are deciding on how to proceed — traditional litigation, a collaborative divorce, or mediation.

She said she has seen the cost of a traditional litigated divorce with child custody issues range from about \$10,000 on the low end to \$100,000 on the high end.

“Mediation, on the other hand, can dramatically lower the cost for couples who can work things out together,” Ms. Turbeville said, adding that mediation costs can usually be contained to the low-to-mid four figures.

Other financial considerations also come into play, according to best selling finance author Ric Edelman, especially for couples in Pennsylvania where there is a mandatory two-year waiting period for a no-fault divorce.

The no-fault divorce doesn’t mandate anyone prove misconduct. Instead, it recognizes the marriage is suffering from irreconcilable differences.

“Depending on your finances, you may prefer being tied to your spouse financially,” said Mr. Edelman, chairman and CEO of Edelman Financial Services in Fairfax, Va. “A stay-at-home mom may need to stay on the husband’s health insurance.”

“Divorce is one of the most devastating financial events people can experience,” he said. “And we are seeing an increasing trend in what we call ‘gray divorce,’ which involves people over the age of 50.”

As a long-term trend, Mr. Edelman also said it has been his observation that divorce filings spike at the beginning of the year.

“The holidays are stressful and it reveals tensions within the family that are often masked during other parts of the year,” he said.

Some spouses may be inclined to file a divorce at the start of a new year to strategically keep the other spouse from sharing a financial windfall, said Ms. Turbeville.

“A high-earning spouse may want to initiate a separation early in the year due to an expected bonus later in the spring that they are hoping will not be considered marital assets,” she said.

Just because couples are reluctant to file for divorces during the holidays doesn't mean family courts aren't busy this time of year.

“Around the holidays we deal more with custody issues as far as parents fighting over who will get the kids on Thanksgiving and Christmas,” Ms. Frank said. “Then it seems like in January, February and more so in March, the divorce filings pick up.”

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