

Dining Out with Food Allergies



When you are dining out with food allergies, planning ahead is important. Follow these tips on what to do before you go out and when you are at the restaurant to have a better dining experience.

Before You Go

Restaurant Selection

- **Ask around.** Your Allergist and other individuals and families who manage food allergies may have recommendations. To see if a particular restaurant may be a good choice, check out the website and review the menu in advance.
- **Pick a restaurant that best fits what you can eat.** Avoid riskier choices, which could include:
 - **Buffets.** With a wide variety of foods so close to one another, the risk for accidental exposure and cross-contact is high.
 - **Bakeries.** There is a high risk of cross-contact, since many items are made with common allergens and many are not packaged.
 - **Restaurants that serve pre-made foods.** The staff may not have an accurate list of the ingredients in a pre-made item. Since the dishes are not prepared from scratch, you can't ask the chef to remove the problem ingredient from an item that would otherwise be safe to eat.
 - **Restaurants that are known to use allergens in many dishes.** For instance, peanuts and other nuts are used frequently in Asian cuisines. In ice cream shops, shared scoops increase the risk of cross-contact. If you have a fish or shellfish allergy, it's a good idea to avoid seafood restaurants.
- **Consider chain restaurants,** especially when you're traveling. Each restaurant is likely to use the same ingredients and prepare foods the same way, and a growing number are allergy-aware.
- **Know your options.** If you plan to attend a catered event where the food will be prepared in advance, ask if it's possible to provide an allergy-friendly option.

Prepare for Your Dining Out Experience

- **Call ahead and ask to speak to a manager.** You can find tips and sample questions to use when calling restaurants on our website at foodallergy.org/diningout.
- **Timing is everything.** Choose a day and time when restaurant kitchens are not as busy. The best time to dine at any restaurant is during the first hour of a service period. The staff is more alert and attentive, and the kitchen is much cleaner. If possible, plan for an early meal.

- **Bring a chef card.** This wallet-sized card lists your food allergies and states that your food must be cooked in a clean and safe area to avoid cross-contact. You can find online sources for cards in multiple languages, make your own, or download a template on our website.
- **Be prepared.** No matter how carefully you've planned or how safe you feel at a particular restaurant, never leave home without your epinephrine auto-injector and any additional medications, and be sure to wear your medical identification (e.g., bracelet, other jewelry).

At the Restaurant

Communicating with Restaurant Employees

Communication between restaurants and customers with food allergies is essential to a safe dining experience.

- **Talk to everyone.** The restaurant manager and wait staff should know about your food allergy. Remind a manager or the head waiter about your allergies before you are seated. Present your chef card and ask that it be shown to the chef.
- **Ask what is in your dish and how it is prepared.** Make sure your server understands what you are allergic to, and explain that cross-contact must be avoided. Consider speaking to the manager and the chef, just to be sure. Know what procedures a restaurant should follow to keep your food safe.
- **Never be embarrassed if you feel you're not communicating well.** If the wait staff doesn't seem to understand your situation, always trust your gut and seek out another staff member or manager. Sometimes, the safest choice is to avoid eating, enjoy the company of your friends, and find a safe meal somewhere else afterwards.
- **Reward excellent service and build a relationship.** If you have a good experience at a restaurant, tell the staff about it and go back.

Meal Selection

- **Keep it simple.** If you have to ask a lot of complicated questions about the items on a menu, ordering more simple fare—like a baked potato, broiled chicken or steamed vegetables—may be the safest way to go.
- **Avoid fried foods.** Both the grill and the frying oil are ripe for cross-contact; it's best to avoid fried foods unless you know for sure that they are prepared safely.
- **Be very careful when ordering desserts.** Desserts are often a source of unexpected allergens. Since many restaurants order their desserts from specialty shops, the staff may not be able to provide a complete list of ingredients. If in doubt, wait and have a safe dessert at home.