



Dining Out—Before You Go

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

Restaurant Selection

- Ask around. Your allergist and others 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. FARE's restaurant database is available at www.safefare.org.
- Pick a restaurant that best fits what you can eat. It is best to 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 some of the top 8 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.
 - 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 parlors, 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.
 - 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.

- Consider chain restaurants, especially when traveling. Each restaurant is likely to use the same ingredients and prepare foods the same way, and a growing number are allergy-aware.

Prepare for Your Dining Out Experience

- Call ahead and ask to speak to a manager. Chef Joel Schaefer has tips and sample questions for calling restaurants, available on our website.
- 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).





Dining Out—Calling the Restaurant

When calling a restaurant, call between meal periods. Do not call during peak breakfast, lunch or dinner hours. The best time to call is between 2:00 p.m. and 4:00 p.m. Most restaurants are not as busy during these hours and you can spend time talking with a manager or chef. If a manager or chef is not available, ask for the manager or chef's name and the best time to call back. Be ready with your list of questions.

Here are suggested questions to ask once you have informed them you or your child have a food allergy:

Are you willing to try to serve me in your restaurant?

If they say yes, then provide them with as much information about your food allergies or special diets. Make sure they understand how serious an allergic reaction can be.

How often do you train your staff on food allergies?

This is important because there is constant employee turnover in the food service industry. You do not want a new employee handling your dietary request that has not been trained properly.

Do you have a separate area to prepare foods for special diets?

If the answer is yes, ask what foods are prepared in this area. There may be hidden allergens used in this area.

Do you have separate cutting boards and utensils to prepare my meal on?

Several companies make color-coded tools for safe food preparation for people with food allergies. If they have these tools, it is a sign that the restaurant has a special understanding of food allergen safety procedures.

Will you be at the restaurant while I am there?

If not, ask for the name of the manager or staff member who is aware of the circumstances.

Do you have any specialty products for people with food allergies?

If they carry prepared mixes, rice milk, or packaged snacks or desserts that are from trusted manufacturers, this restaurant is demonstrating awareness about food allergies and planning for guests who have these needs.

Will I be able to look at ingredient labels?

If they are willing to show you ingredient labels, this is a good sign that this restaurant is going to be accommodating. Remember, you are the expert on your food allergy, not the restaurant staff.

Discussing the Menu

After providing the manager or chef with the list of your food allergies, advise them of what you usually eat when dining out. With this information, the chef should be able to create a menu item that will fit your needs.

Next, discuss cooking preparation. Sautéed or baked items will minimize the use of common cooking equipment and shared utensils. Go through the list of ingredients being used in your dish, including garnishes, to ensure there are no hidden allergens. Once you have both agreed on your meal, write it down and take this information with you to the restaurant when you dine. Inform the manager or chef when you plan on dining to see if he or she will be there to oversee your meal.



Dining Out—At the Restaurant

We want you to feel confident discussing your food allergies when you arrive at a restaurant. Taking the steps below can help you successfully place your order and communicate your needs, leading to an enjoyable and safe dining experience.

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's prepared. Make sure your server understands what you are allergic to, and explain that cross-contact must be avoided. You may want to speak 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 effectively. 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.
- If you have a good experience at a restaurant, tell the staff about it and go back. Reward excellent service and build a relationship.

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 especially careful when ordering desserts, which are often a source of hidden 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.

Insider's Guide to Dining Out

When you arrive at the restaurant, check in with the host or hostess. Since you called ahead to let the restaurant know about yours or your child's allergy, ask if there is a notification of your allergy or special diet on your reservation. If there is, this is a good sign that your information was communicated to the restaurant team. If there is not, this should be the first 'red flag,' but do not be discouraged. Ask them to inform the manager that you have arrived, and you would like to talk to them when you are seated.

When you arrive at your table, check the cleanliness of the table and chairs. It is very important that your seating area is clean and sanitized, particularly if you have ever had a reaction from touching your allergen. If the server advises you that they are aware of your dietary request, let them know you would still like to speak with the manager or the chef on duty. You should always deal directly with a manager or chef to ensure the right information is getting to the kitchen.

When the manager arrives, show him or her the written menu option you discussed with the restaurant prior to your arrival (see the Calling the Restaurant section for more information). If the manager seems attentive and genuinely concerned, go over your request in detail with them. Ask if they can personally handle your food so that there are no mistakes. If they agree, you are on the right track.

Servers should not prepare any part of your meal. Server areas can be very busy with many servers working on a variety of orders at the same time. Ladles and tongs used for serving soups and salad ingredients can be inadvertently placed back with the wrong food. This will cause your meal to come in contact with other foods you may be allergic to.

When your meal is delivered, first, make sure the person who delivers your food is your server, a manager or the chef. If it

is someone you have not spoken with, this should be a red flag. Ask for a manager to double-check your order. This person may have picked up the wrong food.

Secondly, your plate should be delivered separately. Many restaurants teach the technique of "plate stacking," where the plates are balanced on the server's arm and delivered to the table. You do not want your plate next to another guest's plate that might contain an allergen.

Third, confirm your order with them. Have them describe how your meal was prepared and listen for anything unusual. Did they mention an ingredient or cooking technique that was not discussed earlier? Then look at the plate. Are there any garnishes? Is the item cooked correctly? If anything looks wrong, ask questions. You need to assess the situation and make the final decision. If anything is wrong and you feel uncomfortable, send the food back. Better safe than sorry!

If you do your research, talk to a chef or manager about your dietary request, communicate your needs with the staff at the restaurant, and review your meal before taking your first bite, you and your family will have a wonderful dining experience over and over again.

Joel Schaefer is a certified Chef de Cuisine with the American Culinary Federation and a Certified Hospitality Trainer with the American Hotel and Lodging Association. His company, Allergy Chefs, Inc., specializes in culinary education, food allergy and special diets training, recipe and menu analysis, and product development. He is the author of Serving People with Food Allergies, Kitchen Management and Menu Creation. Previously, Chef Schaefer was Culinary Development and Special Dietary Needs Manager at Walt Disney World Resort, where he developed a program that helped thousands of families enjoy a dream trip to Disney World in Orlando, FL.