



## How to Eat Out on a Special Diet:

This article contains the best recommendations that I have seen on how to **eat out** on a special diet and the best advice that I have seen on how to protect yourself from contamination while dining out.

This article is from the Magazine, Living Without Magazine. For more tips about dining out safely, please visit, [www.livingwithout.com/dininout](http://www.livingwithout.com/dininout).

## Inside Look at Eating Out (For Special Diets)

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### The Inside View

The restaurant industry employs a wide range of people—from high school and college students to senior citizens. Many are short-timers, just trying to make extra money to get through school or to pay for an evening out. This does not always make for a focused employee.

Wilde for Health, Beth Wilde, Holistic Health Coach, 1420 Cypress Creek Rd, Suite 200-145, Cedar Park, TX 78613, Direct: (512) 423-6566, Email: [Beth@WildeforHealth.com](mailto:Beth@WildeforHealth.com), Website: [www.wildeforhealth.com](http://www.wildeforhealth.com)

Everyone in a restaurant—greeter, busser, server, manager, cook, chef and dishwasher—must work together to make your dining experience enjoyable and safe. This is even more important when preparing food for a guest with food allergies. Everything may look fine when you enter the restaurant but it can be a different story in the kitchen, a place I call “controlled chaos.” It is noisy, hot and busy. The chef or expeditor is calling out orders. Cooks are dropping food into the fryers, flames are rising from the sauté station, dishwashers are restocking plates and utensils for the cooks and servers are running around the kitchen getting items for their guests. It is like a well-oiled machine—if there are no surprises. A food allergy request can cause a disruption but if a restaurant has a food allergy policy in place, the chances are good the kitchen will keep running smoothly and guests will be served safely.

### **Do Your Homework**

Before going to a restaurant, choose a cuisine that suits your special diet. If you’re sensitive to gluten and dairy, you may want to steer clear of Italian restaurants. If you’re allergic to fish or shellfish, avoid dining at a seafood place. Think of the pressure put on a chef, knowing that fish is everywhere in the kitchen.

Once you’ve decided on cuisine, select a restaurant. Check online. If the place has a website, review the menu to determine what’s offered. See if the site contains allergen information. If it does, it’s a plus. But don’t completely believe everything you read online. Check when the information was last updated. Updating a website is time consuming and expensive. Many restaurants, particularly independent eateries, don’t have the manpower or money to keep their website information current.

In addition, restaurant suppliers switch product ingredients on a regular basis and they may not notify the restaurant until after items are delivered. The chef or manager may not know immediately if there’s been a slight change in an ingredient formula. Double-check menu ingredients when you’re at the restaurant

### **Call Ahead**

The best time to contact a restaurant is between 2:00 and 4:00 pm. Most restaurants are not as busy during these hours and the manager or chef is more likely to have time to talk with you. Don’t call during peak breakfast, lunch or dinner hours.

I always recommend talking to a chef, manager or the person in charge. You’ll save yourself time and get the answers you need. If a manager isn’t available, ask for the manager’s name and the best time to call back.

When you talk with the manager, have your list of questions ready. The type of questions you ask will depend on the severity of your sensitivity or allergy. Here are a few suggestions:

**1. Are you willing to accommodate my special diet?** If they say yes, provide them with more information about your food allergies. If you have multiple allergies, make sure they are aware of this and that they understand the severity of your allergic reaction.

**2. Do you have a food allergy policy?** If so, this is good news. Ask what company provided the training. The Gluten Intolerance Group, for example, offers restaurant training and certification through its Gluten-Free Restaurant Awareness Program. Ask how often staff is trained—an important question because there is constant employee turnover in the food service industry. You don't want a new employee who hasn't been properly trained handling your dietary request.

**3. Do you have a different area to prepare foods for special diets?** If the answer is yes, ask what type of food is prepared in this area. Depending on your particular sensitivity, there may be hidden allergens used there. Ask about separate cutting boards and utensils. If they use these tools, it's a good sign.

**4. Do you have specialty products for people with food allergies?** When a restaurant carries special-diet pancake mixes, soy or rice milk and packaged snacks or desserts from reputable manufacturers, it is taking food allergies seriously. Verify cooking procedures to check for cross contamination.

**5. May I review your recipe book?** Many restaurants have recipe and ingredient books. There is a difference between these two. An **ingredient book** can contain actual ingredient labels, photocopies of ingredient labels, vendor ingredient statements or retyped ingredient statements. This book can be beneficial but it has two major flaws. First, ingredient information may not be up to date. Second, retyped ingredient statements can be improperly transcribed. If a restaurant staffer is dedicated to monitoring product changes or if the operation has a static menu with minimal menu changes or product substitutions, an ingredient book can be a useful tool for a food-allergic guest.

A **recipe book** is common in most, if not all, kitchens. These books are often updated when recipes are changed so the information is usually accurate. Ask if recipes include information about food allergens and vendor ingredients.

**6. May I look at ingredient labels?** I'm a big advocate of reading ingredient labels, since this is the most accurate information. If the restaurant is willing to show you ingredient labels, it's a good sign they will accommodate your special diet.

Depending on the severity of your food allergy, receiving a "no" to any of these questions could raise a red flag that you may want to address further. If you get a "no" to question 1, the decision is already made for you. Find another restaurant. If you get a "no" to questions 2 and 3, it's a good sign they will accommodate your special diet. If you get a "no" to questions 4, 5, and 6, it's a red flag that you may want to address further. Find another restaurant.

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3, I would have concerns. If restaurant staff don't understand why they should keep food segregated during the preparation and cooking process, they don't understand food allergies. If they're willing to make changes and learn more, it may be worth your time educating them.

In the end, if you have a good conversation with the person in charge and he or she is confident in the ability to serve you safely, ask to speak to the chef about your menu options.

When you talk to the chef, provide him or her with the list of your food allergies, advising what you usually eat when dining out. With this information, the chef should be able to pick out a menu item that fits your need. Then discuss cooking preparation. I suggest a sautéed or baked item. This will minimize the use of common cooking equipment and shared utensils. Go through the list of ingredients, including garnishes, to make sure there are no hidden allergens. Once you have both agreed on your meal, write it down. Inform the chef when you plan to dine at the restaurant to see if he or she will be there to oversee your meal. It's best to work with this chef, who now understands your needs. Now you can comfortably make your reservation.

#### **Prepare to Dine:**

These resources can help you decide which cuisine or restaurant is best for you.

[www.allergyeats.com](http://www.allergyeats.com) is an online guide to allergy-friendly restaurants.

***Let's Eat Out with Celiac/Coeliac & Food Allergies! A Timeless Reference for Special Diets***, by Kim Koeller and Robert La France, contains seven ethnic restaurant cuisines with hundreds of menu items identifying corn, dairy, eggs, fish, gluten, peanuts, shellfish, soy, tree nuts, and wheat.

***The Essential Gluten-Free Restaurant Guide***, published by Triumph Dining, describes over 6,500 gluten-free restaurants and covers all 50 states. It's updated annually.

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### **At The Table**

Plan on having an early meal. 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. After a few hours of “controlled chaos,” many employees are ready to go home and the kitchen is in the process of breaking down the line (putting everything away).

When you arrive at the restaurant, check in with the greeter. Ask if there is a notification of your special diet on the reservation. If there is, it’s a good sign that the person in charge communicated your information to their team. If not, ask them to inform the manager that you have arrived and you would like to talk to him or her once you’re seated.

At your table, check the cleanliness of the table and chairs. If you have a contact food allergy, it’s very important that your seating area is clean and sanitized. If everything looks clean, it’s a good sign of how the restaurant is run. A dirty table is a red flag that should be addressed immediately. While they’re cleaning the table, check to see if they use clean towels and sanitizer. I’ve seen employees wipe eating areas with disgustingly dirty towels that just transfer allergens from one place to another.

After you’re seated and the server arrives, ask to speak to the manager or chef with whom you discussed your dietary request. If neither one is available, it’s another red flag. If the server assures you that they’re aware of your dietary request, still insist they get a manager or chef on duty. I would not discuss your food allergy in detail with the server. You should always deal directly with a manager or chef to ensure the right information is getting to the kitchen. When the leader arrives, discuss the menu option you agreed upon with the chef prior to your arrival.

If the leader seems attentive and genuinely concerned, go over your request in detail and ask if he or she can personally handle your food so that there are no mistakes. If the leader agrees, you are on the right track.

Other 'red flags' would be the server not wanting to get a leader or the manager seeming not interested or looking distracted during your conversation.

The biggest 'red flag' is that the person taking your order does not write it down and does not repeat it back to you. How can anyone remember every detail of your order, especially if they're taking orders for more than one person in your party, as well as handling orders from several other tables? It is impossible, so make sure they write down your order and review it with you before placing it with the kitchen.

### **Beyond the Pass**

I do not recommend a server preparing any part of your meal. Servers want to 'turn and burn' their tables so they can seat more guests to increase their tips. Server areas can be very busy, with people battling for position to get food out to their tables. Ladles and tongs used for serving up soups and salad ingredients can be inadvertently placed back with the wrong food. This may cause your meal to come in contact with other foods that contain your particular allergen. I suggest having every item prepared by the chef or culinary staff.

Now your ticket (order) is in the kitchen. Your allergies should be noted and the chef should announce to the kitchen staff that there is a food-allergy meal request. There should be a 'stop and clean' process done before your meal is prepared. The chef has to consider the timing of your meal with the other items at your table so he or she can coordinate its preparation. As your meal is being prepared, it doesn't stop the kitchen from preparing other meals. Your meal is just getting more attention. Once it is completed, it should be placed in the window (a shelf above a steam table under a heat lamp) away from other meals that are ready for service. A special ticket should be set next to it so that no one takes it by mistake. When all the meals for your party are ready, your plate should be carried out separately to your table with the ticket.

### **On Your Plate**

The moment of truth has arrived. 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 dealt with before, it's 'red flag.' This person may have picked up the wrong food. Double-check your order, even if you have to ask for the manager to be sure the item is correct.

Your plate should be delivered separately. If it isn't, it's another 'red flag.' Many restaurants teach a technique called plate stacking, where the plates are balanced on a server's arm and delivered to the table. You don't want your plate next to another guest's plate that might contain an allergen.

Confirm your order with your server. Have him or her explain how your meal was prepared and listen for anything unusual. Finally, look at the plate. Are there any garnishes on the plate? Is the sauce on the side? Is the item cooked correctly? If anything looks wrong, ask questions. Do not assume the chef got it correct. Assess the situation. If anything is wrong and you feel uncomfortable, send the food back and have them make it again. Better safe than sorry. Remember, you are the expert on your food allergy, not the restaurant personnel.

If you do your research, talk to a chef or manager about your dietary request before arriving, 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 magical dining experience over and over again. Bon appetite!

Chef Joel Schaefer, former culinary development and special dietary needs manager at Walt Disney World, is author of *Serving People with Food Allergies* and owner of Allergy Chefs, Inc., a company that advises restaurants on safely serving those with special dietary needs.