



# Eating out with allergies

Does your food allergy or intolerance mean you have to miss out on dining out? EVE MENEZES CUNNINGHAM INVESTIGATES

**P**eople with food allergies are far too often regarded just as fussy eaters. But according to the Food Standards Agency (FSA), around 10 people in the UK die from an allergic reaction to food every year. In most cases, the food is from a restaurant or takeaway.

If you have a severe food allergy, or coeliac disease, it's difficult to find a restaurant where you'll be absolutely sure that your food isn't contaminated with something you're sensitive to. Currently, the onus is on the individual to ensure that a caterer is aware of their dietary requirements, which is why many people have to take great care when dining out – or even miss out on the experience altogether.

Thankfully, the FSA is now keen to provide information to allergic diners, and held a series of meetings last year to enable guidelines to be drawn up. 'The meetings were attended by representatives from the catering sector, food manufacturers and retailers, consumer groups and enforcement bodies,' says a spokesperson. 'We hope to have a draft of the guidance ready for public consultation this spring.'

In the meantime, the FSA has this advice: 'When you book a table at a restaurant, ask the person taking the booking to check with the chef if they can provide you with a meal that does not contain the food you are sensitive to. If they are not confident they can deal with your request, it's better to eat somewhere else. Make sure the waiter or waitress knows about your allergy and how serious it is. If you're not confident that they understand how important it is for you to

avoid a particular food, it is best not to eat there. Remember that the ingredient might not even be mentioned on the menu, so always double-check with the waiter or waitress. Tell them what dishes you are planning to order and ask them to check with the chef that they definitely do not contain the food you need to avoid.

'If at any time during the meal you think that you may be having a reaction, stop eating and take your medication. If you think you are having a severe reaction, ask your friends, family or the restaurant staff to call for an ambulance with a paramedic. Meals are not always made the same way, so if you have eaten a particular dish in one restaurant, do not assume it will be safe the next time or in a different restaurant.'

## A recipe for success

According to Miles Quest, a spokesperson for the British Hospitality Association, restaurateurs and caterers have become increasingly aware of food allergies. 'Most of our restaurants – certainly the larger groups such as Harvester and All Bar One – have some indication on the menus about nut content and so on. For less common allergies, you'd need to ask whether the food is suitable either before or at the time of ordering, but they'd certainly be able to tell you.'

Although nuts clearly represent the chief area of concern, there are other allergies that are not yet widely recognised, such as to fish, wheat and dairy. 'Many menus do carry a nut allergy warning, but sometimes it unhelpfully points out that all dishes may contain nuts or nut oil,' says Quest. ❖

**Did you know**  
– around 10 people in the UK die from an allergic reaction to food every year and in most cases the food is from a restaurant or a takeaway?

## 'EATING OUT CAN BE A MINEFIELD'

**Hazel Gowland has a severe nut and peanut allergy. She has been hospitalised on several occasions when eating out due to an allergy-related asthma attack or anaphylactic shock.**



Hazel works for the Anaphylaxis Campaign and also undertakes independent allergy training, giving half-day courses to caterers and other food handlers (for example, in schools and nurseries) to help educate them about food allergies. She says her options are very limited when it comes to eating out: 'I can't go to Indian, Chinese or Thai restaurants, because nuts and peanuts are used so widely that they often show up in unrelated dishes. When choosing a restaurant, I have to consider the style of the food, how allergy-aware the establishment is, and the kind of response I get when I first mention my food allergy.'

'Most of the people who suffer a fatal allergic reaction to food have consumed it unknowingly. You need to consider whether cross-contamination could have occurred in the kitchen. Different cakes on display could have shared the same tongs, or something could have dropped from another shelf, for example, and even a slight amount of contamination could be life-threatening in some cases.'

'If you do have a severe reaction while eating out, you should be kept still and lie down if possible. Keep your knees raised because your symptoms may cause your blood pressure to drop suddenly and this is the best way to keep your circulatory system going. As time is critical, it's vital that paramedics with resuscitation support arrive as soon as possible. Your companions should make an emergency call and give a clear explanation of your allergies.'

'It would be great if all catering establishments had information about recipes, ingredients and potential allergens readily available. If you do find a restaurant that bends over backwards to accommodate your allergies, let them know you appreciate the effort and try to build a trusting relationship so you'll be able to eat there again.'

'This is because some ingredients used in kitchens are not marked by the manufacturers before use, so the chef may be unaware of their precise content. Most chefs are happy to cooperate, although where significant costs are involved in avoiding allergens in the food, this would be reflected in the price of the meal.' Unfortunately, the specialist health food restaurant sector is still quite small. Quest estimates that there are a few thousand in the UK specialising in allergen-free dishes.

## Food for thought

Karen Close runs WOWfoods and WOWcafé, in Holmfirth, West Yorkshire, which boasts a gluten-, dairy- and wheat-free menu. 'The number of eateries catering for people with allergies is on the increase,' she says, 'but there is still a shortage of quality establishments. Finding out that I was wheat-intolerant two and a half years ago made me want to make a difference.'

'I'd always been a keen cook, so I started experimenting. One of my friends asked if I could make a gluten-free cake and she loved it. The satisfaction I got from that spurred me on to sell my food at the local market. The demand was fantastic, so the business grew.' Karen was inspired by Andrew Whitely, the founder of the Village Bakery, which sells wheat-, gluten- and dairy-free foods, including cakes and biscuits. 'I enrolled on one of his gluten-free cooking courses and was inspired to follow my dream, to open my own café. He really sold the idea of organic foods to me and now I believe that pesticides are a contributory factor to the rise in allergies,' she says. ❖

**The number of eateries that cater for people with food allergies and intolerances is on the rise, but there is still a shortage of quality, stylish establishments**

## Your essential eating out guide

Follow **Hazel Gowland's top tips** to judge if a restaurant caters well enough for people with food allergies and intolerance. There's no need always to stay at home! Ask the head chef or restaurant manager:

- **What exactly is in the food I want to eat?**
- **Does this establishment have any kind of allergy management system; for example, do you check pre-packaged food for allergens?**
- **Is there any possibility that food might be contaminated in your kitchen or in a factory before you serve it?**

Make sure the restaurant staff know:

- **What you're allergic to well in advance of eating there.**
- **How bad your symptoms are and whether your allergy is life-threatening.**
- **That you are willing to eat off-menu if they can create a dish to suit.**



