

Children's Health Tip of the Day

Food, Glorious (and Safe) Food -- Protecting the Child With Food Allergies

If your child has a life-threatening food allergy, dining out could be dangerous. According to a recent study, restaurant waitstaff and chefs are not cautious enough when providing meals for allergic customers.

How to dine out when your child has a food allergy

Enjoying a meal away from home is possible for those who suffer from severe food allergies, as long as precautions are taken. One important precaution is an invention of the National Restaurant Association called a Food Allergy Buddy card.

A food allergy card contains information about the specific items your child is allergic to, along with additional information, such as a reminder to make sure all utensils and equipment used to prepare the meal is thoroughly cleaned prior to use. You can easily print these cards yourself using a computer and a printer. If your child is eating out with friends and you are not going to be present, give your child a food allergy card (or make sure the adult in charge has one) to give to the server. To create a printable card, log on to www.foodallergybuddy.com.

More tips for safe dining out

Other precautions include:

- Do some detective work. When possible, obtain a menu from the restaurant or from the restaurant's Web site ahead of time and review the menu items. Speak to the chef or manager ahead of time to discuss allergy information. Ask if the establishment has separate allergy menus.
- Let your server know from the beginning about your child's food allergy. Be polite and acknowledge that you are asking for additional consideration from the server, but stress that your child's life depends on it. Ask about preparation and ingredients before you order. If your server does not know this information or seems unsure, ask to speak to the manager or chef.
- Avoid buffet-style or family-style service, as there may be cross contamination of foods from using the same utensils for different dishes.
- Avoid the rush. You will be more likely to get individualized attention if you avoid the peak times at the restaurant.
- Be aware of cross-contamination. Cross-contamination occurs when food is prepared on a surface or using a utensil that has touched an allergen. For example, a knife used to cut a turkey sandwich could also have been used to cut an egg salad sandwich. In addition, avoid fried foods, as the vat of oil used for frying could have fried many different kinds of foods.
- Don't take chances. If you have doubts about your order, politely ask your server to double-check. Send food back if a mistake has been made in the kitchen. And if at any point you feel that your concerns aren't being taken seriously don't be afraid to leave the restaurant.
- Be prepared. Medical experts warn that no amount of caution is a substitute for being prepared. Anyone with food allergies should keep an epinephrine injector with them at all times.

Reviewed by: [Patrick S. Pasquariello Jr., MD](#)

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