

Eating Out Without Standing Out

by Linda Steakley, MS, RD, LD

Many people have to pay attention to what they eat for health reasons. Some have specific food allergies. Others have medical conditions that will flare up if they don't carefully follow a special diet. Certain foods are not permitted for members of some faiths and cultures. And all of us know someone who is trying to watch their weight or lose weight!

If your diet is limited, eating in restaurants can be tricky. If you are out with your friends and feel self-conscious about food concerns, you might be tempted to "treat yourself" just once, and have what everyone else is having. But "treating yourself" should mean being good to yourself and taking care of your body.

Some people consider dietary matters to be private, and if you feel that way, that's fine. But if you have diabetes, lactose intolerance, or a peanut allergy, for example, or even if you are just trying to eat healthier, it's often much easier to let your friends know about it.

If you plan to eat out, do your homework. Have you been told that you are allergic to milk, fish, shellfish, nuts, eggs, wheat, soy, or another food? Do you have diabetes or irritable

bowel syndrome? When you walk into the restaurant, don't walk away from your good intentions.

A few tips for those with medical restrictions:

- Don't hesitate to ask if a problem food is in a menu item before you order it. It might not be obvious from what is on the menu. So ask!
- Find restaurants that feature choices that work for you. Suggest one of these places when your group is going out.
- Think ahead. Check out the nutrition information from the restaurant's brochures or Web site. Find some smart choices and stick with them.

A few tips for those who would like to make healthier choices:

Are you trying to watch your weight or just eat more healthy foods? Don't let a sudden impulse throw you off your plan!

- Ask the wait staff to leave the sour cream out of the burrito, leave the cheese and croutons off the salad, or serve a low-calorie salad dressing "on the side" and add just a small amount.
- Think portion control! Weight control or weight loss is about both what you eat *and* how much. Share or downsize your order.
- Even the "healthy" choices on a menu are sometimes prepared with "hidden" high-fat or unhealthy ingredients. Don't be afraid to ask how something is prepared. The chef can always make substitutions.

Lots of people have special diets. Eating out shouldn't be a problem if you plan ahead and talk to people who can help. If you are overweight or have other dietary restrictions, make an appointment with a registered dietitian. If you have diabetes, talk to a certified diabetes educator. If you have celiac disease or food allergies, see if your community has a support group. Special diets shouldn't keep you at home, and shouldn't make you feel alone!

Great Sources on the Internet:

- <http://www.exhibits.pacsci.org/nutrition/default.html>
Nutrition Café is a joint project of the Pacific Science Center and the Washington State Dairy Council. This site provides a "nutrition calculator" and other great interactive tools.
- www.eatright.org
The American Dietetic Association site is a tremendous resource
- www.foodallergy.org
Facts and strategies for coping with food allergies from the Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network

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This patient education sheet is distributed in conjunction with the July 2005 issue of *Adolescent Health Update*, published by the American Academy of Pediatrics. The information in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. Comments and suggestions on *Nutrition Notes* should be forwarded to Marc Jacobson, MD, FAAP (jacobson@lij.edu).

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Supported by an unrestricted educational grant from the Nestlé Nutrition Institute™