

Eating Out Safely on a Gluten-Free Diet

If you have celiac disease, the only treatment is a strict, lifelong gluten-free diet. Even tiny amounts of gluten can make you sick and damage your intestine, even if you don't feel symptoms. Eating out takes a little planning, but it can be done safely. Here's how.

Know what to avoid

Gluten is found in three grains: wheat, rye, and barley. This includes foods made from them, such as regular flour, bread, breadcrumbs, pasta, couscous, most soy sauce, malt, and regular beer.

Other grains and starches are safe: rice, corn, potato, buckwheat, millet, quinoa, and certified gluten-free oats. (Ask your doctor or dietitian before adding oats, and choose only oats labeled gluten-free, since regular oats are often contaminated with wheat.)

Watch for hidden gluten

Gluten shows up in places you might not expect. Be cautious with:

- Cream soups, gravies, and sauces (often thickened with wheat flour)
- Salad dressings and marinades
- French fries and other foods dusted with flour before frying
- Soy sauce, spice blends, and coatings
- Processed or seasoned meats, veggie burgers, and even some ice cream
- When in doubt, ask. Don't assume a dish is gluten-free.

Choose the right restaurant

- Look for restaurants with gluten-free training or certification through a celiac support organization, these tend to understand cross-contact.
- If none are available, pick a place that serves naturally gluten-free dishes or foods that can easily be made without gluten (grilled meat or fish, plain rice, vegetables, salads without croutons).
- Keep in mind that restaurant "gluten-free" labels are not regulated by the FDA, so it's up to you to ask questions.

Plan ahead

- Most restaurants post menu items and allergen information online. Some may also have a list of gluten free menu choices. Reviewing the online menu can help you get an idea of what to order and identify questions to ask staff when you get to the restaurant.

- Call during off-peak hours (mid-afternoon) when staff have more time. Good questions to ask include:
 - Do you have a gluten-free menu, or dishes that can be made gluten-free?
 - Have your staff had any gluten-free or celiac training?
 - How do you prevent cross-contact?

Speak up when you order

Tell your server you have celiac disease and ask if they know what that means. If not, explain simply: "I can't eat anything with wheat, rye, or barley—including flour, breadcrumbs, or soy sauce—even a small amount, or I'll get sick." Being clear that this is a medical need, not a preference, helps the kitchen take it seriously.

Ask about cross-contact

This is where most accidental exposures happen. Helpful questions:

- Can my food be prepared in a clean area, away from flour?
- Will you use clean or separate pans, utensils, and cutting boards?
- Do you clean the grill before cooking my food?
- Do you have a dedicated fryer for gluten-free foods? If not, fried foods are usually not safe.

The good news is that a whole separate kitchen usually isn't necessary. Thorough handwashing, clean equipment, and keeping your food a reasonable distance from flour are often enough. A couple of things to flag specifically:

- Pasta cooked in the same water as regular pasta is not safe—ask for a fresh pot of water.
- Shared fryers are a common source of gluten—always ask.

Keep it simple

The safest dishes are simple ones without breading or sauce—grilled or baked meats and fish, plain vegetables, rice, and salads (dressing on the side, no croutons).

Have a backup plan

Sometimes a restaurant just can't offer a safe option. If that happens, eat something at home beforehand or bring your own gluten-free food so you're not tempted to take a risk.

Double-check before you eat

When your food arrives, confirm it's the gluten-free version. It's always okay to ask again.

Share your experience

If a restaurant did a great job, thank them and tell others—it helps them keep it up and helps fellow celiac patients find safe places to eat. If something went wrong, kind feedback helps them improve.

Work with your care team

A registered dietitian who knows celiac disease can be a huge help—teaching you how to read labels and menus, avoid cross-contact, and eat out and travel safely. Restaurant cards (that explain your needs to the kitchen) and celiac support-group apps are also great tools.