



Ask the Teen...

TESS ROSS-CALLAHAN (AGE 16)

Q: I was recently diagnosed with celiac disease and have just started to eat out again. Sometimes my friends and I go to restaurants that normally serve gluten but have gluten-free menus or items, but I always get nervous that they're actually giving me something with gluten in it. How can I be sure that I'm safe?

A: Short answer? You can't.

While it doesn't happen often, sometimes restaurants will make really ridiculous mistakes with your order. Just last week my family ordered pizza and pasta from a local Italian place that we have been going to for years without issue. When my sister cracked the lid off the pasta, she was surprised to see noodles of a different shape: elbows as opposed to the regular spirals. Never having seen this kind of pasta in one of our dishes before, my mom called to double-check that it was gluten free. It turned out that the restaurant had accidentally given us regular gluten pasta in our "everything gluten-free" order. The pasta was given to my father, following ancient family tradition of giving him the leftovers, and my sister and mother turned to open their salads instead.

And the salads were covered in croutons.

All in all, a really bad showing on the part of this restaurant. We never had problems with them before, but "how safe something is to eat" depends on the staff on any given night and how good they are at keeping things gluten free. The best advice I can give to avoid this is to ask as many questions as possible. Don't be afraid to be obnoxious if you have doubt about what you're given. Obnoxious people are hard to ignore or forget, and the restaurant is less likely to overlook your diet requirements if you advocate for yourself.

This is not to say that you should march into restaurants snapping fingers and shouting orders like Beyoncé. (Not that I know if Beyoncé has ever actually done this. She seems like a very nice woman. She's just such a fantastic music diva that I sometimes like to imagine her using attitude in real life.) Nor, for that matter, should you treat restaurants like they have claws and refuse to go out. Generally, restaurants will be very careful with your order if you explain to them that you have a food "allergy." Some places will send the manager out with your food so that you're sure that you've been taken seriously. Others will have "gluten free" scrawled along the top of the take-out box or the edge of your plate so that you know what to eat. Still others will apologize and sheepishly explain that gluten-free food will take longer because it requires the use of a separate fryer or oven. All of these signs are good ones to look for if you want to be sure that you're eating something safe.

Another good way to find trustworthy restaurants is the internet, and I'm not just saying that because I'm just as hopelessly plugged in as every other kid my age. There are a lot of gluten-free websites and forums that will talk about experiences with restaurants and analyze if they're safe or unsafe, if their food is good or if it tastes like cardboard, and if their service is reliable or incredibly slow—or both. If you have gluten-free friends in the area, get recommendations from them and build your own network of places to go. To avoid mistakes like the one with our local Italian place, just remember to pay attention to what you're eating and ask questions as soon as you have any. If you do that, you shouldn't have any problems, and you should be able to eat out just as easily as you did before you were diagnosed. Good luck and bon appétit!

If you are a teenager and have an issue, problem or question you want advice on send an e-mail to: celiacsupportgroup@childrens.harvard.edu And put "Ask the teen" in the subject heading.