



Ask the Teen...

TESS ROSS-CALLAHAN (AGE 16)

If there was a book called "How to Send Your Celiac Teenager Overseas Without Having a Heart Attack" by Tess Ross-Callahan (that's me, by the way), it would probably contain the following:

1. First, don't panic. Unless you are the type of parent who worries all the time about nothing, your panic will make your kid panic, which will make you panic more and your kid panic more, and that's just a downward spiral that nobody wants to get into. Trust me. I've done it.
2. Call the airline. Ask for some gluten-free meals for the flight there and back when you're buying the ticket, but also call a few nights before leaving to make sure that they know. That way your teen will at least be fed en route, even if that food is spew-worthy bad, as mine was. I'm still not sure what kind of meat I was eating - maybe fish, maybe chicken - but it was very dry and, mysteriously, saltier than anything I've ever eaten. But just in case there wasn't enough sodium, I also received five (!) little packs of salt. Maybe they thought I should add some salt to the apple-sized grapes that were as soft as pudding, or maybe to the gluten-free roll that was as stiff as the plate it was on. But take comfort! Nobody likes airplane food. It's not just the gluten-free meal.
3. Contact the place you'll be staying. In my case this was a French family, because I was doing an exchange program, but for you it might be a series of hotels or a farm or a Belgian chocolate factory. (Although if you're at a Belgian chocolate factory you're going to have plenty of wonderful things to eat.) Either way, it really helps to know the language of the place you're contacting. If you don't, you can ask a neighbor, friend or teacher. If you aren't afraid of looking like an idiot, just plug it into Google Translate. News flash, kids: Google Translate is not an effective way to do your Spanish homework. However it happens, make sure the places you are staying know and understand the diet so they can be ready for you.
4. Use the Internet. Okay, I always say that, but it's still true. I had my own little freak-out before

leaving for France, to the point where I was looking up "how long a person can live without food" just in case it actually came to that. I suggest you be smarter than I was and start by looking up the celiac restaurant cards in the language of your destination and doing some research into the online menus of the restaurants you might go to. For example, www.celiactravel.com is an incredibly helpful website, and many of the countries you're traveling to will have official gluten-free agencies with great resources on their websites. For example, the French gluten-free agency is AFDIAG. Its website, <http://afdiag.fr/>, gave me a great list of safe, risky and unsafe foods usually eaten in France. Even just typing "celiac travel" into Google can get you some great things.

5. Talk to others. Sometimes - not always - there will be people who are taking you on the trip, such as administrators or teachers, who might have experience with caring for kids with celiac disease and can help. Always make sure they know. Sometimes they can even direct you to someone with celiac disease who's been on the trip in the past, which is like being handed a bag full of gold. Take advantage of that if it happens!
6. Prepare! I'm not kidding when I say my bag was half food. Instant oatmeal, two loaves of bread, a peanut butter jar (to avoid cross-contamination), uncooked pasta, cereal and tons of bars. I had to bring a lunch every day to meet my tour group, so I made sure to bring the essential gluten-free items and money to purchase other things, like fruit and dairy, once I was there. I was worried I would get stopped by security because they would immediately think something was up when they saw how much food I was carrying.

In the end, I was not hungry once when I was in France. My French "family" was very understanding, and I actually ended up eating too much every night! If you're going on a trip without your parents like I did, don't worry - just make sure to get ready for it, and you'll have a great time. Bon appétit! (And now you know why my little sign-off is in French.)

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.