

reaction time

Don't let food allergies stop you from enjoying N.Y. restaurants

More than 12 million Americans suffer from food allergies, with reactions ranging from mildly irritating to deadly. And while New York City provides some of the best allergy care in the country, the wide variety of foods here also makes dining a challenge for those who need to be careful.

Food allergy coach Sloane Miller has dealt with her own allergies to tree nuts and salmon since she was 2 and has spent her life helping New Yorkers manage allergies. The 38-year-old — whose blog, “Please Don’t Pass the Nuts,” has spawned a book called “Allergic Girl: Adventures in Living Well With Food Allergies,” out next year — says the trick to avoiding bad reactions is knowledge.

What's it like to live with food allergies in New York City?

There are more than 25,000 restaurants of all kinds of foods. Ethnic food can be both a boon for someone who has food allergies or it can make eating more difficult. It can certainly be more challenging depending on your allergies, like someone with peanut allergies shouldn't eat Thai food. But one of the tools that I teach is knowing when to realize that a restaurant isn't right for your allergies.

Have you had a bad allergic reaction to food recently?

Last summer, I was kissing a guy who had a beard and had eaten cashews without telling me. While we were making



Sloane Miller offers advice on dealing with food allergies.

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out, I started itching to the point where I wanted to tear my skin off. Everywhere he had been kissing me I was covered in aggressive hives and I was wheezing. It is really important to know what the symptoms of a severe reaction are and how to treat them.

At dinner, I had told him what to do in case of an emergency, so

he was very helpful in making sure that I had my medication and things calmed down. Luckily I didn't end up in the hospital. But that was just from contact with the residual cashew protein.

Do your food allergies affect how you eat?

I'm very careful, but I've

landed in the hospital a few times because of allergies. It is beyond scary. Once you have a life-threatening experience from eating food, it takes an enjoyable, pleasurable experience and turns it into something very scary. It takes a while to undo that fear and learn how to trust again.

How should New Yorkers with allergies approach a restaurant?

The first thing is to have their medication with them at all times. You'd think that would be obvious, but a lot of adults go out to eat without their medication. The next step is to go online and look at the menu. This keeps you from getting stuck at a restaurant that is inappropriate to your needs. If you can, call ahead and speak with the general manager. Don't talk to the busboy or the hostess. This is the time to be confident and gracious. Smile. Say hi. It's

not a time to get demanding or threatening. That never works. If the manager says, “We don't feel comfortable,” then just have a drink, but don't risk it. Ultimately, this is about managing risk.

Do your food allergies define who you are?

Allergies are a part of me, but not everything. They are not the totality of who anyone is. But it needs to be taken seriously. People need to be their own advocates. Understand that most people will not know what you are talking about; be patient with those around you and be gracious. New Yorkers with food allergies can eat food from all over the world as long as they know their allergies and have a protocol in place. Evaluate the risk, make an informed decision.

For more information on food allergies visit AllergicGirl.com.
Jacob E. Osterhout

YOU SHOULD KNOW

Restaurant chains that Allergic Girl recommends for New Yorkers with food allergies:

◆ **P.F. Chang's** — “These restaurants have a great allergen protocol. I actually did a huge tasting once and they are very thorough. I would trust them to understand my food allergies.”

◆ **Chipotle Mexican Grill** — “I go all the time. It's gluten-free and

they don't use nuts. Of course, they do cook with soy, so stay away if you have a soy allergy. But with everything else they are pretty good.”

◆ **Olive Garden, Red Lobster** — “If you have an allergen protocol in place and speak with a manager, these restaurants should be very accommodating.”

◆ **Dos Caminos** — “Despite that corporate smell of the joint, everyone from hostess to server to manager is consistently helpful and appropriately concerned about food allergies. I feel confident stopping in and knowing that they would do a decent job of taking care of my allergies and food intolerances.”

J.E.O.