

HEALTHY LIVING

Allergic to certain foods?

Then tell the waiter

BY CAROLYN O'NEIL

Cox News Service

With one in 25 Americans — that's 12 million people — making special menu requests because of a food allergy, there's an increased need for up-to-date and practical guidelines for restaurants to follow.

"Take Action to Prevent an Allergic Reaction" is the theme for National Food Safety Education Month this September. Taking the "action" part seriously, the National Restaurant Association, in partnership with the Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network, has updated and revised its 60-page food service training guide, "Welcoming Guests with Food Allergies."

Available free for download from www.foodallergy.org/welcomingguests.html, the guide is intended to educate restaurant employees. But Sheila Weiss, R.D., director of nutrition policy for the National Restaurant Association, says customers coping with food allergies can benefit from the guide's behind-the-scenes look at restaurant operations.

"Often, looking at the menu descriptions is not enough," Weiss says. "We strongly encourage communicating a food allergy to the restaurant staff so it can be addressed right up front. All ingredients should be disclosed. There are no secret sauces or secret thickeners."

While some food allergies are more serious than others, all food allergies and food intolerances demand serious attention when choosing what to eat or what NOT to eat when dining out. For instance, if you're allergic to shrimp, don't order the jambalaya. But, eggs or milk and nuts can sneak into recipes without any warning. This is where it's imperative to step up the detective work when navigating a restaurant menu.

Your first line of defense is the server, who should be able to describe menu items and their ingredients in detail. However, this is no time to guess what's in a dish. So if the server doesn't know for sure, ask to talk to the manager or the chef. And you can ask to see a container's ingredient label.

Chefs should be trained to prepare allergen-free versions of items upon request. But you should also know what's possible and what's not. If the gumbo is made with oysters, chefs can't just "whip up" one without oysters.

Restaurant staff should be aware that even a miniscule amount of food can set off a severe allergic reaction. For example, some people are allergic to mollusks but not to fin fish. So make sure to ask what kind of seafood was used to make the "seafood sauce" served with the fish.

Food allergies are potentially life threatening for some people, so the rest of us shouldn't "cry wolf" and demand a high alert from the restaurant staff if it's not really necessary. ■



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Control exposure indoors

BY HOWARD POUSNER

Cox News Service

While it's hard to dodge pollens and molds outdoors, seasonal patients will suffer less if they control their exposure to allergens indoors, believes Dr. Kingsley Chin of Piedmont Ear, Nose, Throat and Related Allergy, in Atlanta.

The bedroom is the particular battleground where Chin encourages patients to focus on "environmental control," since that's where most people spend a third of their lives. If you can get make your resting place as free of allergens as possible, then those eight hours of sleep give your system a chance to recover, leaving you in better shape to ward off outdoor enemies the next day.

Here's are some of Chin's suggestions for controlling allergens indoors, culled from a patient handout:

► If you've been outside a lot during the day, pollen is on your body and clothes. Don't bring them into the bedroom. Upon arriving home, immediately



take a shower and change clothes.

► Use allergy covers over pillows and mattresses. These zippable and washable covers trap dust mites, microscopic critters who live in mattresses and pillows by the millions and whose droppings stir allergies.

► Wash all bed coverings weekly in hot water, which kills dust mites.

► Purchase a HEPA filter, which will significantly reduce allergens in a typical bedroom. A HEPA filter should exchange the air in a bedroom about six times an hour, so keep it going on high even when the room is unoccupied and keep the door and windows closed. It can run at a quieter level when it's sleep time. ■

It's not too early to get flu vaccine

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention wants you to start thinking about the winter flu season.

Curtis Allen, CDC spokesman, urged people to get their flu vaccine now. "The ideal thing to do is to get the flu vaccine as early as possible," he said.

With influenza activity typically peaking in January or February, many patients wait until November to get the vaccine, according to Allen.

But by that time, some doctors' offices may run out of supply. And if you get the vaccine now, you are covered for a longer period.

Getting vaccinated on the earlier side could prove to be especially important this year because the CDC recently expanded its recommendation for vaccinations to children up to their 19th birthdays, with the exception of infants younger than 6 months and those with serious egg allergies.

Dr. Chip Harbaugh of Children's Medical Group expects a surge in demand at the practice's two large metro Atlanta

offices, which typically administer 16,000 flu vaccines.

About 145 million doses of the flu vaccine — which include the flu shot and nasal-spray flu vaccine — will be shipped out this flu season, up from 113 million last year, according to Allen.

Last year, the flu shot was a bit off-target — a good match for only about 40 percent of flu viruses. Typically, a flu virus is effective for 70 percent to 90 percent of viruses, according to the CDC.

But even when the vaccine is a mismatch, doctors say the vaccine can prevent hospitalizations and deaths from flu-related illnesses.

Randi Meyer of Dunwoody, Ga., is getting an early start on getting flu vaccines for the family. She recently had her 9-month-old baby Abbi get a flu shot, and she plans to have her two older kids soon get the nasal mist spray. In the past, she's had to wait because her doctor's office was temporarily out of supply.

"We want to keep [the flu bug] out of the house," she said. ■

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