The Do’s and Don’ts of Dining Out With IBS

by EMMI SCOTT

Eating at Restaurants With IBS

For most people, eating out at a restaurant is considered a treat. It’s an opportunity to enjoy a meal with friends and to eat food that you may not cook at home. But eating at restaurants with IBS can be extremely stressful.

Many people with IBS manage their symptoms at least partially through diet. When someone who does not know your dietary restrictions cooks a meal for you, a lot of things can go wrong.

Fortunately, with some preparation, you can avoid eating something that will trigger your IBS symptoms, and you can simply enjoy going out for a meal.

Make a List of Approved Restaurants

This is a great tool to have for spontaneous meals out. Make a mental list of restaurants where it is easy for you to order according to your dietary needs.

You should also consider how you feel after eating at specific restaurants. If your IBS symptoms act up after having a meal somewhere despite careful ordering, you may want to stop eating there.

While a mental list of restaurants will work for your hometown, you may want to keep a physical list on your phone or a piece of paper when you travel.

When preparing to visit a new city, research restaurants online and write down the ones that seem like they will work for you.

This way, when you are out and about on your trip and it is time for lunch, you will have plenty of options to choose from instead of having to look up restaurants when you are already hungry.

Look Up Menus Online

Whether you are traveling or trying a new restaurant close to home, study menus online before eating out.

Most restaurants maintain their own websites or have menus on other platforms where you can search for and rate restaurants.

This will inform you about what to expect when you are eating out so that you are not disappointed in your options when you are already at a restaurant.

It will also give you a chance to pick out a few dishes that you know you can eat. This way, you can enjoy your meal companions instead of scanning all of the ingredients on the menu when you are at your table.

Call Ahead About Substitutions

Sometimes when you look up a menu online, you will find a dish that is almost right for your dietary needs, but not quite.

If this is the case, call the restaurant before you go to see if they are able to make ingredient substitutions so that the dish works for your restricted diet.

If the restaurant is unable to make a substitution, look for other dishes that will fit with your diet. If none are available, it is probably best to find another place to eat.

Prepare Your Body

Even if you order a meal that is free of foods that you avoid, it is likely that you will eat a meal that is richer than you would cook at home. This may be more difficult for your body to digest.

To prepare your digestive system for this experience, do things that support digestive processes throughout the day beforehand. Drink plenty of water, engage in gentle exercise and practice stress management techniques, like meditation or mindfulness practices.

If you are able to successfully manage IBS symptoms before eating out, you will be more likely to feel comfortable and enjoy yourself when you get to the restaurant.

Be Frank With Your Waiter

Some restaurants train their wait staff to ask customers if they have any dietary restrictions, but not all do, so you may need to volunteer this information.

If it is important that you do not eat food that includes or has come in contact with certain ingredients, let your waiter know so that they can communicate with the kitchen.

The restaurant may also have menus that show what dishes are free of certain ingredients, like gluten or dairy. If you tell your waiter that you are on a restricted diet, they can share resources like these with you.

Know Where the Bathroom Is

If you have IBS with diarrhea, you may feel nervous about having an emergency at an unfamiliar restaurant and not knowing how close the bathroom is.

To ease this particular source of stress, scope out where the bathrooms are when you first get to the restaurant. That way, if you need to get to a bathroom quickly, you can go straight there instead of having to ask for directions.

If you already feel uncomfortable when you arrive and think that diarrhea may be an issue, you can also ask the host to seat you close to the bathroom.

Save Part of Your Meal for Later

One way to support digestive function and to avoid triggering IBS symptoms, like gas and bloating, is to avoid overeating. However, restaurants often serve meals that are two to three times larger than a normal serving size.

Instead of finishing your whole meal at the restaurant, take some of it home in a to-go box. You can enjoy it again for one or more meals, depending on how much you have left over.

Be Willing to Change Plans

No matter how much careful planning you put into eating at restaurants with IBS, an issue might arise and cause you to change plans.

It’s always a good idea to have a second option in mind in case your first choice does not work out.

If you need to go home because you are not feeling well, be patient with yourself. There will be other opportunities to go out to eat, and prioritizing your health is important.

Enjoy Yourself!

While there are many issues to consider when eating at restaurants with IBS, going to a restaurant can still be a fun experience.

Once you have put your preparations in place, make sure to step back from any worries you have about eating out. Enjoy the taste of the food you so carefully ordered.

Remember that much of the experience of going out to eat revolves around the people you are with. Have a good time and enjoy the company of people you care about!