



“Specially” Hospitable

WELCOMING PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL DIETS

I’M WHEAT-INTOLERANT. One crumb of wheat will give me severe pain and discomfort, decreased energy, and other nasty symptoms for up to six weeks. I’ve been aware of my intolerance for more than 20 years, so I’ve learned to live with it. Here are some things I’ve learned along the way:

Going to an ordinary Adventist potluck when you have a food allergy or intolerance is like walking through a minefield! Fortunately, as I’m intolerant to wheat and not allergic to it, my reaction isn’t life-threatening. But for someone with a severe allergy or a potential for anaphylaxis, incorrectly labeled food can be catastrophic.

My worst experience was at a church banquet. The caterers had been told about my diet, but they had forgotten. I couldn’t eat the appetizer, and they promised to find me an entrée I could eat. I asked if I could just eat the vegetables, but they wanted to wait until the entrée was ready. They were too busy to find me anything. I couldn’t eat the dessert either. Finally, two hours after the meal started, I was given a quick apology and a plate of cold, leftover vegetables.

THE POTLUCK CHALLENGE

Many people who have special diets no longer come to potlucks because it’s too stressful to eat food in an environment that is not allergy-aware and safe. Some bring their own lunch and make sure that no one accidentally drops any crumbs on their food.

We can also feel awkward when we have to ask the cooks specific details about their ingredients. We often feel excluded from church social events, such as pizza parties and veggie-burger barbecues.

And although it's tempting to be curious about our food intolerances and allergies, please try not to ask, "So, what happens if you accidentally eat some?" Most of the side effects are very unpleasant, and we don't really want to discuss them in public!

PROTECT THE PREPARATION

- Ask those with special diets in your church to train others how to care for their needs.
- Write an information leaflet explaining the importance of being scrupulously careful when cooking and serving food for people with special diets.
- Make food for special diets using spotlessly clean utensils and work surfaces. Avoid making other dishes at the same time so that you don't accidentally transfer contaminated ingredients on utensils, by hand, or even through the air.
- Line pans and dishes with baking parchment or foil in case there's a residue of allergens on the container.
- Keep special diet dishes covered and protected so they're not contaminated. Place them on the top shelf of the oven so that contaminants such as pizza crumbs don't fall into the food accidentally.
- Search the Internet for a list of allergen-free ingredients. Lots of everyday recipes are made with perfectly safe ingredients. Use gluten-free breadcrumbs in nut roast recipes, use spiralized vegetables instead of pasta, and cut thin slices of butternut squash or grill aubergine (eggplant) slices to replace pasta strips in lasagne dishes.

- Purchase a variety of allergen-free entrees and desserts and keep them in the church freezer. Make a sign for the food table or church bulletin that welcomes visitors with special diets and invites them to choose special meals that can be quickly prepared especially for them. When they can be guaranteed that the food is safe, they'll feel more comfortable joining in with the meal.
- Provide printed labels for potluck foods listing the most common allergens. Ask people to name their dish and tick any of the allergenic ingredients it contains. Make sure that they check the contents of *every* ingredient they use, as some allergens are not always obvious in things such as seasonings, sauces, and soup mixes. For example, soy sauce usually contains wheat, but many people are not aware of this.
- Your label could look like this:
This dish is ... Eggplant parmigiana.
It was made by ... Karen Holford.
It includes dairy ___ wheat ___ gluten ___
eggs ___ sugar ___ celery ___ soy ___ etc.



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SERVING SPECIAL FOODS SAFELY

- Place dishes made for special diets on a separate table.
- Provide each special dish with a separate spoon. If someone uses a spoon from another dish in the special food, they will contaminate the food and make it unsafe.
- Discourage people who do not have special diets from trying out the special dishes.
- Invite people with special diets to take their food first. Give out passes for the special diet table to prevent other people from taking the food.
- Never “top up” branded sauce, dressing, and ketchup bottles from cheaper bulk catering packs because it “looks better,” unless it’s exactly the same brand and the same ingredients.

DON'T FORGET COMMUNION

- People who cannot eat wheat and gluten often feel excluded from Holy Communion. Provide a wheat- and gluten-free alternative for everyone to eat, or provide a completely separate plate of wheat- and gluten-free crackers.

INVITE US!

Please invite people with special diets to your home. We just want to be with people without having to worry about the food. Feel free to ask us to bring along an entrée or dessert that everyone can eat, or we can share our favorite recipes with you.

A simple soup or a hearty salad are perfect, and we can bring our own bread if we want to. We’re usually offered fruit salad for dessert, but if you can be a little more creative, that would be wonderful! Search your grocery stores for “free from” alternatives, and find out which of your local bakeries and cafés specialize in wheat- and gluten-free cakes. Look online for raw dessert recipes, which will never include wheat. Try out recipes for raw brownies, made with dates, pecans or walnuts, cocoa, and other natural ingredients.

EVERYBODY’S WELCOME!

With a little thought and preparation, your church can provide meals for those with special diets, and everyone who comes to your church will feel welcome. It’s such a tremendous gift to me when I go to a potluck where I can share in the food—and the joy—with everybody else. Thank you! J

Karen Halford is the Family Ministries director of the Trans-European Division, and she likes experimenting with raw and wheat-free recipes, especially desserts.

