



*From the National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse
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Holiday celebrations are brimming with food and fun, but they also create special health and dietary challenges for the more than 2 million people in the United States with celiac disease, an intolerance of the protein gluten found in wheat, rye, and barley.

If you have celiac disease, you can still enjoy holiday breads, cookies, pies, and other treats—it just takes some planning and creativity. Here are some tips to help you have a gluten-free holiday season:

Do your homework. Because a gluten-free diet is the only way to manage celiac disease, knowing which foods you can and cannot eat is crucial. While wheat rolls and pasta dishes are obvious no-no's, learn what other foods—such as casseroles, gravies, salad dressings, and soy sauces—might also contain gluten and look for gluten-free alternatives and recipes. When it comes to holiday cheer, a cocktail made with distilled alcohol is safe, but avoid the beer unless it is gluten-free.

Plan ahead. If you are attending a party at someone's home and are unsure of the menu, prepare and bring a dish to share that you know you could eat.

"If the party is at a restaurant or hotel, call the chef or food service manager for information about the menu," advises Shelley Case, dietitian and author of *Gluten-Free Diet: A Comprehensive Resource Guide*

. Ask if there is a gluten-free menu or whether you can request a special meal. Case says, "you'll have more success if you call several days to a week in advance. The best time to reach a restaurant or caterer is about 2 p.m.—between the lunch and dinner rush." Once you arrive at the party, confirm that your special meal is being prepared and let the kitchen staff know where you are seated.

Be assertive. Even small traces of gluten—such as the amount found in bread crumbs that accidentally come in contact with gluten-free food prepared on the same surface or with the same utensils—will cause cross contamination. Be sure to tell the server or chef that it's important to use extra care in preparing and serving your food.

“If you get a salad with croutons, send it back and ask for a fresh-made salad to avoid getting the same salad with the croutons picked off,” says Case. If you don't trust the chef, restaurant, or party host or hostess to deliver a safe, gluten-free meal, eat something at home beforehand and order a beverage, fruit plate, or another safe alternative.

Be creative. Experiment with gluten-free alternatives to holiday favorites. Try cornbread instead of wheat bread stuffing, or cookies, breads, and rolls made with a combination of gluten-free flours such as bean, corn, nut, potato, rice, sorghum, or soy flour. If you're pressed for time, try gluten-free bread and cookie mixes. These and other gluten-free foods are becoming available at more grocery stores and food outlets as awareness of celiac disease grows and retailers respond to consumer demand for better products.

“Fortunately, gluten-free foods are getting better and better so everyone can eat them without feeling deprived,” says Carol Fenster, author of several gluten-free resources including *Gluten Free 101* and *Cooking Free: 200 Flavorful Recipes for People with Food Allergies and Multiple Food Sensitivities*. Fenster recommends checking the baking aisle of your local health food store for gluten-free baking products and tapping into the Internet or gluten-free cookbooks for new recipes.

Change your focus. While food takes center stage during the holiday season, don't forget to relish special time with family and friends. Focusing more on people and less on food can make your holiday more meaningful.

Stay positive. Think of all the food you can eat—especially the healthy alternatives, says Case. “There is a wide variety of foods you can enjoy.”