

Travelling with food allergies

By Robert Haru Fisher



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How do you stay healthy during your trip if you have food allergies?

Travellers with food allergies have to be extra careful when planning a trip abroad. If your trip takes you to a country where the main cooking ingredients are on your blacklist, it can be tricky to ensure that your meals are safe, especially when you don't speak the language.

Here are some quick tips:

- Research the common foods of your destination country and talk to your health practitioner about your travel plans.
- Pack the medications you need to prevent an adverse reaction like antihistamines or epinephrine injectors with refills.
- Find a reputable doctor or hospital prior to your trip in case of an emergency. Carry your [IAMAT Traveller Clinical Record](#) outlining your food allergies so that healthcare providers abroad are aware of your condition.
- If you're grocery shopping abroad, read labels and be aware of packaging that does not list ingredients. Note that in many countries there are no or weak food labelling regulations and some products may be partially labelled.
- Tell others about your food allergy. Carry a personalized translated card detailing your allergies to show restaurant waiters, grocery store clerks, or food vendors. [SelectWisely](#) offers a wide range of professionally translated cards. You can also download the [Allergy Food Translator](#) mobile app.

Travel writer Robert Haru Fisher has unfortunately experienced allergic reactions to food while travelling. Here are his insights and tips on what he does to prevent another one from occurring:

I've had allergies to certain foods all my life, and yet I have visited over 100 countries in my more than 50 years as a travel writer, mostly for the [Fodor](#) and [Frommer](#) guidebooks. At first, my only weapons were my wits, which taught me to speak English slowly if I did not know the native language and always to speak to whomever prepared the food. Fewer people outside English-speaking countries spoke English back then. (In the Mideast, the second language was often French or German, for instance.)

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Photo by Romi Pixaba, Pexels.com

Now, however, you can arm yourself with better weapons. I always carry three items with me whenever I plan to eat out, even in the USA or other English-speaking countries. They are:

1. printed Allergy Warning cards explaining what I am allergic to, in English and the appropriate foreign language;
2. an Epi-Pen with at least two vials of epinephrine; and
3. an [IAMAT Directory](#), listing the local hospitals that are members of IAMAT.

If I am in a North American city or foreign destination where IAMAT has no listings, I research the place and write down a note with the name of the nearest hospital to the restaurant I intend to visit, and put that note in my shirt pocket, where I also place the Allergy Warning cards. (Your hotel front desk may be the easiest place to learn about hospitals where English is spoken, or where the foreign community goes.)

Sometimes, you may want to phone ahead to the restaurant and warn them about your allergy, but I usually just advise the waiter immediately on sitting down, then hand him or her my Allergy Warning card in both English and the appropriate foreign language, and ask the wait staff to show the cards to the chef and report back to me if what I order was safe to eat. If the answer came back, “No, what you ordered is not safe,” then I would ask the chef to recommend something that was OK to eat.

My cards read: “Allergy Warning! I can be killed by eating PEANUTS, PEANUT OIL, GREEN PEAS. Please be sure the food I order does not contain any of those products. Thank you! Robert Haru Fisher.” (This is not hyperbole, as my throat can swell up and stop my breathing if I don’t get help immediately.)

I print my own cards in English on my computer. For correct foreign-language cards, contact Select Wisely, where I have been able to buy laminated cards in most languages. Some years back, when the company did not have the appropriate language, I would go on the Web and search, in one case finding a woman in Prague who translated short items into Czech just for pleasure, not charging anything.

I have had dozens of wait staff tell me, when I hand them the card, that they appreciate such printed advice, it being very helpful to them. (And I have sat next to, on more than one occasion, someone who will tell a waiter, verbally, that he or she was allergic to five or six different things, expecting the waiter to remember the items. I once counted a fellow diner mentioning nine different allergies!)

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My allergies have grown more severe as I grew older, and I have been incorrectly advised food was safe several times, resulting in brief hospitalizations, most of them in the USA, where occasionally a few people don't understand allergies, one fellow in Key West telling me, for instance, that "allergies are all in your head." My scariest experience was eating from a buffet in Kunming (China), then boarding a bus for Stone Mountain, about an hour's ride away. By the time I arrived, I could barely talk or breathe, but I found a First Aid station there, and after preliminary treatment which included using my own Epi-Pen, I was transported by ambulance back to Kunming to the Red Cross Hospital.

My best experience illustrating the usefulness of IAMAT membership was in Beijing, where a chef lied to me and my interpreter about the safety of our food, even after reading my Chinese-language (Mandarin) warning card. Back in my hotel room after a short nap, I felt my tongue and throat swelling, grabbed my IAMAT directory, took it to the front desk, and, unable to speak, pointed to the name and address of what I took to be the nearest member hospital, the Peking Union Medical College Hospital (Foreigners' Clinic). The hotel manager sent a bellhop with me to get a cab and accompany me to the hospital where he waited until he saw that I was in good hands. I was there two days, sharing a room with an Australian prisoner handcuffed to his bed (drug smuggling) in a "special" section of the hospital. I have been a believer in IAMAT for the past 40 years, but never more so than that time! 🏠