

A little preparation can make eating out fun again.



PAUL BARTON/CORBIS

Dining out isn't out!

by Shelley Peterman Schwarz

A few years ago, I attended an awards luncheon where I was seated at the head table on a raised platform in front of 500 people. When the meal was placed in front of me, I screamed a silent “No!” Having no use of my right arm and hand, I knew there was no way I could eat the food on my plate without someone’s help. I fought back tears as I turned to the man next to me and asked him to cut up my food. Fortunately, he was a young father and we ended up joking about how well his children had prepared him for this task.

For years I’d avoided situations like this by always ordering foods

I could eat with my hands, like sandwiches or fried shrimp. This preset luncheon menu caught me totally off guard.

When we’re limited physically, eating in public, whether for a quick lunch, a romantic dinner, or an awards banquet, can create stressful situations. I’ve learned over time how to keep embarrassment to a minimum, so that dining out will not be “out” for me.

Special techniques

If the water glass is too heavy or your hands tend to shake, ask your server to get you a straw or to fill the glass or cup only half-way. Sometimes a stemmed goblet can be easier to lift.

When ordering something that needs cutting, ask your server to cut your food into bite-size pieces

in the kitchen before it’s brought to the table.

Hold your fork as close as possible to its tines or your spoon to its bowl for better leverage. If you use adaptive eating utensils, bring them! Tuck them in a plastic baggie to take them home again.

If you find it difficult to eat without spilling, use moisture-proof, disposable paper napkins from Gourmet Guard™. These large napkins have an adhesive strip along the top that sticks to your clothes. They are a lot less obtrusive than a bib with neck strings! Visit Caregiver.com, click “Store,” then “Products and Services,” or call **800-829-2734**.

Anticipating problems

If you have swallowing problems and need to order foods you can

eat without choking, look up the restaurant online to review the menu—or call ahead to discuss a special order. If you eat very slowly, or tend to fatigue during eating, try having a snack before you go. You'll be less taxed if you don't try to eat a full meal—and you might have room for dessert.

Frenetic, noisy restaurants can deplete energy and increase the chances of choking when eating. Choose venues with drapes, low ceilings, and carpeted or vinyl floors. As a safeguard, carry ear-plugs in your purse or pocket.

Avoid darkened restaurants which may make it difficult to navigate across the room, read the menu, or communicate with your companions.

Call ahead to check on the most convenient entrance. Ask if

there is handicapped parking or valet service, where the restrooms are, and if they meet your accessibility needs. Be sure to say if you use a mobility device—and what it is—when making reservations. Consider requesting a table near the entrance if walking distances is a problem.

At special events like weddings or awards dinners, alert your hosts when you RSVP. For example:

Please cut my food into bite-size pieces before serving. Or, I use a wheelchair; please remove the chair where I will be seated.

And above all, enjoy your outing!

Shelley Peterman Schwarz shares many more things she has learned about living with MS at **Making LifeEasier.com**.

New guide for family caregivers

Caring for Loved Ones with Advanced MS: A Guide for Families is a comprehensive look at what families need to know when a family member has advanced MS that is so severe the person cannot be left alone for any extended period and has complex clinical issues. Edited by Dorothy E. Northrop, MSW, ACSW, and Debra Frankel, MS, OTR, with input from key Society staff and a multidisciplinary task force of professional volunteers, the 112-page book answers tough questions in down-to-earth language. Every section ends with a list of valuable resources. Best of all, this book is available free from your chapter, with the help of a generous grant from the Dr. Matthew and Cynthia Hertz Charitable Foundation. Just call **1-800-344-4867** and ask for a copy.

