MAST CELL ACTION

Socialising and Eating Out

Nourishing Health and Happiness with MCAS

Trusted Information Creator™

Patient Information Forum



Registered Charity Number 1164917

Disclaimers

Trigger warning - this document is about food and contains images of food.

We recognise that many of the images in this guide contain foods that are restricted on low histamine diets. The images are from stock photos and do not exactly reflect a low histamine diet. We have done our best to reduce references to high-histamine foods wherever possible.

Everyone with MCAS is different, and this is general information, not tailored to your individual needs. This resource is intended to be used alongside support from a qualified health professional. Please seek advice from your medical practitioner or dietitian for specific dietary guidance.

We hope you will be confident to adapt the guidance and recipes for your circumstances, and swap out foods that you are not able to tolerate for others that you are.

This sheet is designed for adults with Mast Cell Activation Syndrome. The nutritional needs of children and teenagers will differ, and the nutritional needs of individuals with specific medical conditions will vary.

If your diet is very limited and you feel that you are struggling to get enough nutrients in your diet or have a specific medical condition that may have specific dietary needs, then please ensure you seek individualised dietary advice from a dietitian with experience in this area.

This resource is designed to support, not replace, tailored advice from your medical team.

For more information about low histamine diets and other dietary adjustments, please see our Self-Management Toolkit HERE

Introduction

Why Does Diet Matter?

Diet plays a really important role in helping those with MCAS, but can also be one of the trickiest areas to navigate, as those with MCAS often have dietary triggers.

What you eat can directly influence mast cell behaviour and histamine levels in the body.

Common Dietary Challenges with MCAS

People with MCAS often face considerable challenges with food, including:

- Food sensitivities and intolerances: MCAS can cause reactivity to a wide range of foods.
- Variable and evolving triggers: Food triggers can change over time or vary based on other factors such as stress, hormone levels, illness, or environmental exposures.
- Digestive issues: Symptoms like bloating, nausea, abdominal pain, and altered bowel habits are common and may require additional dietary adjustments.
- Nutritional adequacy: Due to multiple food restrictions, maintaining a balanced, nutrient-rich diet can be difficult without careful planning.

Socialising and Eating Out

Living with MCAS can make social situations, like gatherings and eating out, especially challenging. Yet, staying connected with others is vital for your wellbeing. With careful planning and effective advocacy for your needs, you can enjoy social activities while maintaining your health as a top priority.

Tips for Socialising

1. Host or Co-host.

Sharing meals with others can be more manageable if you host or co-host the event. This allows you to control the menu and ensure that the food is safe for you to eat. It may also be safer for you if you are triggered by environmental factors. Alternatively, you could offer to contribute by bringing a dish or two that you know are safe to make sure you have something to enjoy without worry.

2. Plan Ahead.

Preparation is key to reducing stress and avoiding flare-ups. Consider contacting the host or venue in advance to discuss any dietary or environmental needs. Checking menus online, bringing your safe snacks, or choosing locations with minimal triggers (such as well-ventilated spaces) can make a big difference to your comfort and safety.

3. Communicate Your Needs

It can feel daunting to explain MCAS to others. But sharing a simple explanation, such as, "I have a condition that makes me react to certain foods and environmental factors, so I need to be mindful of what I eat and where I go," can help set expectations. If you prefer not to discuss details, that's okay too - setting boundaries around what you share is entirely your choice.

4. Choose Your Gatherings Wisely

Not every event or setting will feel appropriate for you, and that's okay. Opting for quieter, smaller gatherings rather than crowded, high-stimulation environments can help you better manage symptoms. Suggesting an outdoor meet-up, a picnic, or a one-on-one catch-up in a familiar, safe space may be a good alternative to large, unpredictable events.



Tips for Social Events

5. Bring Your Essentials

Carrying a small 'Rescue Bag' can provide peace of mind when you're out and about. This might include antihistamines, an EpiPen (if prescribed), safe snacks, a mask (if you're sensitive to airborne triggers), and anything else that helps you manage symptoms. Having these items on hand can help you relax and enjoy your time with others.

6. Listen to Your Body

Social fatigue is very real, and managing MCAS means paying close attention to what your body is telling you. If you start to feel unwell, it's ok to take a break, step away, or leave if you need to. Prioritising your health over social expectations is okay; true friends and loved ones will understand and support you.

7. Have a Support Plan

If possible, attending events with a trusted friend, partner, or family member who understands your condition can provide reassurance. Having someone who can advocate for you, help manage unexpected situations, or simply offer emotional support can make socialising much less stressful.

8. Embrace Alternative Ways to Connect

If in-person gatherings are challenging, explore other ways to stay socially connected. Virtual meet-ups, phone calls, or even letter-writing can maintain relationships while honouring your health needs. Remember, meaningful connections don't always have to happen in traditional settings.

9. Be Kind to Yourself

Living with a chronic condition like MCAS means that some days will be easier than others. It's okay to decline invitations, reschedule plans, or take time for yourself when needed. Socialising should bring joy, not stress. Prioritise what feels right for you, and surround yourself with people who respect and support your needs.



HELPFUL TIP

Try eating while doing something you enjoy, like watching a favourite show or spending time with friends. Making mealtimes enjoyable can help take the pressure off eating.

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Tips for Social Events

Social gatherings can sometimes be overwhelming due to environmental triggers like strong perfumes, smoke, pets, or even temperature fluctuations. Identifying and preparing for environmental triggers, where possible, such as pets or specific foods, can make a big difference in helping you feel more comfortable and in control during social situations..

Consider having a conversation with the host beforehand about any triggers you may need to avoid. They may be able to make simple accommodations, such as removing scented products or opening windows for better airflow.

Educating your friends and family about MCAS can make a big difference. It's important they understand that your needs go beyond just dietary restrictions. Greater awareness can help them be more mindful of things like avoiding strong perfumes, smoke, or other environmental triggers.

You might find it helpful to share our Guide for Loved Ones with them, it's a great starting point for building understanding and support.. Find out more here.

Crowded and noisy environments can make symptoms worse for some. If you're attending an event, it can help to plan ahead by identifying a quieter, low-stimulation space where you can take a break if needed. This might be a quiet room, a garden, or another calm spot where you can rest and reset if you start to feel unwell.

Don't hesitate to ask if certain adjustments can be made, such as using fragrance-free cleaning products or maintaining good ventilation. It's important to set clear boundaries, and it is OK to put yourself first. Politely explain your dietary restrictions and environmental sensitivities.

HELPFUL TIP
Print a list of your safe foods and have handy when out, to make it easier to remember and explain to others



Dining Out

A bit of research and preparation beforehand can help make dining out safer and less stressful.

Checking the venue – Look for restaurants that are known for accommodating special dietary needs. Check menus online and call ahead to discuss your requirements. At the end of this resource, you will find a sample email you can send in advance to explain your dietary needs.

Bringing safe food – If you have dietary triggers, you could bring your own meal or snacks. Or opt for simpler dishes from the menu to minimise the risk of hidden ingredients.

Speak with the Chef or Manager: When you arrive, politely request to speak with someone who can help ensure your meal is prepared safely.

Be selective – You don't have to explain everything. A brief, confident statement like, "I have a condition that makes me sensitive to certain foods and environments, so I need to be careful," can be enough.

Having an exit plan – Let your host or close friends know you might need to leave early if you're not feeling well.

You should feel comfortable asking about ingredients, cooking methods, and potential cross-contamination when you're at a restaurant. Clearly explaining the severity of your condition can ensure that your needs are taken seriously.



Dining Out

Also, be mindful of non-food-related triggers when dining out. These might include cleaning products, scented floral arrangements, or other triggers. Choosing to eat during off-peak hours can help reduce exposure to things like perfume or smoke and often allows for a quieter, more relaxed experience.

If the weather permits, opting for outdoor seating can provide better ventilation and reduce the concentration of indoor triggers, although you may need to avoid vaping and smoking areas.

If at any point you feel uncomfortable or sense that staff aren't taking your needs seriously, it's okay to trust your instincts. In some cases, it may be safer to leave or decide not to eat there. Your health and safety come first.

When your meal arrives, take a moment to double-check that it matches what you ordered. If you notice any ingredients that could be a trigger for you, let the staff know straight away. It's important to explain that simply removing the ingredient isn't enough, as even small traces could cause a reaction. If it doesn't feel safe, send the dish back; your health comes first.

If you have a specific allergy and are eating out abroad, translation cards are available from Allergy UK. These can help you to communicate your allergies or intolerances, where there may usually be a language barrier.



General Tips for Socialising

Building a support network of understanding and supportive people is essential for managing life with MCAS. Having friends and family members who listen, empathise, and provide encouragement can make a significant difference in your wellbeing.

Practising self-care by listening to your body and not pushing yourself too hard is important. Recognise your limits and remember to take breaks, step outside for fresh air, or even leave an event early if necessary. Your health and well-being should always come first.

Focusing on the enjoyable aspects of socialising while remembering to prioritise your health can make these experiences more positive.

It is ok to attend an event and not eat if that is safest for you. Spending time with friends and loved ones and being part of the day is more important than what you eat.

Those who really care about you and your welfare will understand that. Consider eating before you go, and just enjoying time with loved ones at the venue.



Useful Documents

Draft Email to send to restaurants in advance

Dear [Restaurant],

I am writing ahead of my visit to your restaurant on/at. I have a medical condition called Mast Cell Activation Syndrome (MCAS), which means that my immune system can react severely to certain foods and ingredients. Because of this, I need to be very careful with what I eat when dining out.

To stay safe, I must strictly avoid the following:

- [List of specific foods/ingredients – e.g., dairy, gluten, soy, shellfish, nuts, certain spices, food additives, preservatives, alcohol, vinegar, citrus, etc.]
- Any hidden sources of these ingredients (e.g., sauces, marinades, pre-prepared seasonings, stock cubes, etc.).

Meals that are often safe for me include:

- [List safe options such as Grilled Chicken with Steamed Vegetables]
- Grilled white fish with rice and Fresh Salad with Olive Oil
- Fruit Options: Pears, apples

I am always happy to discuss simple adaptations to existing menu items that might work.

It is very important that my food is prepared without cross-contamination. For example, using clean utensils, pans, chopping boards, and surfaces that have not come into contact with the foods above.

Would it be possible for your kitchen to accommodate these needs? I would be very happy to discuss options from your menu that could be adapted safely.

I completely understand that this requires additional care, and I truly appreciate your time and support in helping me eat safely. Please let me know if you feel this is something your team can manage, and if so, what dishes might be suitable.

Thank you for your understanding and assistance. I look forward to hearing from you.

Warm regards,

Name
Contact details

Draft Email to send to your host for a private function in advance

Hi [Host's Name],

Thank you so much for inviting me to [name of event]. I'm really looking forward to [the dinner/your party/seeing everyone]. I just wanted to let you know about something important around food so you're aware in advance.

You might already know that I have a medical condition called Mast Cell Activation Syndrome (MCAS), which means my body can react to certain foods and other triggers. Because of this, I need to be really careful about what I eat, and sometimes even small ingredients or cross-contamination can cause me to be unwell.

The main things I need to avoid are:

- [List specific foods/ingredients, e.g., dairy, gluten, soy, nuts, shellfish, certain spices, additives/preservatives, alcohol, vinegar, citrus, etc.]

I completely understand that this can make catering tricky, and I absolutely don't want to add stress to your hosting. To make it easier, I thought I'd share some examples of safe foods for me:

- [List safe options such as: Plain grilled or baked meat, fish, or chicken (without marinades or seasonings)]
- Steamed or boiled vegetables
- Plain rice, potatoes, or salad with just fresh ingredients

Please don't worry if it feels too complicated - I'm very happy to bring something safe with me, so you don't have to make special arrangements. I just thought it would help to let you know in case you're planning dishes and want to check what might work.

Thank you so much for understanding. I really appreciate it. Most of all, I'm looking forward to spending time together.

Warmly,

Name

Thank you

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Make your legacy a lifeline for people with MCAS, leave a gift in your will to Mast Cell Action.