

# Dining Out for People with Hearing Loss

By Shari Eberts

**D**ining out can be a loud and stressful experience. Today's popular restaurant décor includes hard woods, mirrors, and metal surfaces that reflect noise rather than absorb it. A lack of carpeting and other sound-absorbing surfaces creates a cacophony of sound reverberating around the space. Background music combined with the clinking of cutlery on plates and conversations between other patrons add to the overwhelming din. Hearing the waiter recite the specials, let alone enjoying a quiet conversation with your dinner companions, becomes almost impossible. This is true for everyone. Imagine the challenge if you have hearing loss.

Many people with hearing loss avoid restaurants because of the noise. But with these tips, you can make your next dinner out a success.

**1. Research quiet restaurants.** Quiet restaurants may be few and far between, but they do exist. Read restaurant reviews online; many now feature loudness ratings. Ask friends for recommendations, or consult free crowdsourcing apps, like Soundprint or iHEARu, to locate quiet restaurants in your area.

**2. Provide hearing-related information early.** When you make your reservation, mention that you wear hearing aids and request a quiet table. When the restaurant calls to confirm, reiterate your request. When you arrive at the restaurant, remind the hostess once again. If the first table you are given does not suffice, request to be moved.

**3. Request a table in a corner.** A corner table or a location beside a wall is often quieter because there is a barrier between you and the rest of the restaurant noise. Sitting with your back to the wall will help limit distracting noise from behind you. Experiment to see what works best for you.

**4. Ask for a round table.** A round table makes group conversation easier. People are more likely to face forward as they speak, projecting their voice towards the center of the table and keeping their faces visible for speech reading.

**5. Consider restaurants with sound-absorbing décor.** Look for old school restaurant design features like carpet, drapes, cushioned seats, fabric tablecloths, and acoustic tiles. Many restaurants today prefer hard surfaces like wood and glass. Preview the décor online or stop in to see it for yourself before making a reservation.

**6. Advocate for your needs.** Ask the manager to turn down the music or move you to a quieter table. Request the specials in writing rather than verbally from the waiter. Hearing



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loss is an invisible condition, so others won't know that you need help unless you ask for it. If a restaurant is not open to meeting your needs, vote with your dollars and do not return.

**7. Avoid busy times.** Restaurants are quieter at off-hours, and the management may be more amenable to requests to turn down the music. Eat early or late, or try dining outside if the weather permits. Outdoor spaces often have fewer hard surfaces to reflect sound and more organic materials to absorb it.

**8. Limit group size.** It is fun to eat out in large groups, but this makes conversation more difficult in a noisy environment. Limit groups to four to six people if possible. If a larger group is required, focus on conversing with the people next to you and across from you.

**9. Manage the seating arrangement.** Position yourself towards the center of a large group, and have the people who are more difficult for you to hear sit directly across from you so that you can read their lips. In a group of four, I like to have the person hardest for me to hear sit diagonally across from me. That way if he or she turns to speak to the person next to him or her, his or her voice is still heading in my general direction. Don't be shy about asking for a different seat if needed.

**10. Experiment with technology fixes.** Ask your audiologist to create a restaurant program for your hearing aids that will block out background sounds and focus on voices, or try an assistive listening device. Speech-to-text apps can also be used discreetly right on your phone. Remote microphones where your dining companions wear microphones that connect directly to your hearing aids also work well. <https://www.hearingloss.org/>



Ms. Eberts is a hearing health advocate, writer, and avid Bikram yogi. She is the founder of Living With Hearing Loss, a blog and online community for people living with hearing loss and tinnitus. She also serves on the Board of Trustees of the Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA). She has adult-onset genetic hearing loss, and hopes that by sharing her story she will help others live more peacefully with their own hearing issues.



The Hearing Journal is proud to announce a partnership with the Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA) to provide patient handouts. For information on HLAA activities and events, visit <https://www.hearingloss.org/>.