

Press Release

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**CUTS TO GLUTEN FREE PRESCRIPTIONS BY
MERTON CLINICAL COMMISSIONING GROUP
COULD COST THE NHS MORE IN THE LONG RUN**

National charity Coeliac UK is strongly opposing the proposed cuts to gluten free prescriptions for patients in the region following the announcement of a consultation by Merton Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG).

Coeliac disease is a serious autoimmune condition caused by a reaction to gluten, a protein found in wheat, barley and rye. Coeliac UK, believes any cuts to gluten free prescriptions will leave vulnerable patients with coeliac disease without support which will affect their ability to stick to the gluten free diet - the only treatment for the condition. The potential serious long term health complications of not maintaining a gluten free diet include osteoporosis, infertility and, in some rare cases, small bowel cancer, conditions that could cost the NHS a lot more in the long run.

The National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE) has calculated that the cost of gluten free food to the NHS equates to £194.24¹ per diagnosed patient per year, making it an extremely low cost treatment that addresses potential health inequality in the management of coeliac disease due to the higher cost and limited availability of gluten free food. Last year Merton CCG spent a total of £49,000 on prescribed gluten free foods for patients.

Sarah Sleet, chief executive of Coeliac UK said: “For someone medically diagnosed with coeliac disease there is no choice but to stick to a gluten free diet, day in day out for life and so access to gluten free staples is critical, and is not as easy as you might think. The expansion of Free From aisles in large supermarkets masks the reality of very patchy provision. Research² published in 2015 found that budget supermarkets, most frequented by people on lower incomes and an essential lifeline in rural communities, stocked no gluten free food,” said Ms Sleet.”

“Gluten free food on prescription is a service providing essential NHS support to help manage a lifelong autoimmune disease. We are particularly concerned that if approved by

Merton CCG, this policy would result in health inequality meaning a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable.”

Whilst gluten free food staples such as pasta, are three to four times more expensive than comparable gluten containing products, gram for gram, gluten free bread is six times more expensive* than regular gluten containing bread in the supermarket.

“Any reduction in the gluten free prescription services for people with coeliac disease is being based on budgets rather than patient need or clinical evidence. The provision of gluten free staple food on prescription is a vital element of the support offered to all patients by the NHS and it is essential to prevent long term damage to health,” explained Ms Sleet.

The charity refutes the claim in the consultation document which states:

...other low cost naturally gluten-free foods such as rice and potatoes are widely available

“Simply switching to alternative carbohydrates such as rice and potatoes risks malnutrition with bread alone providing between 10 and 20% of our most important nutrients such as protein, calcium and iron but potatoes and rice only providing a fraction of this,” continued Ms Sleet.

The consultation is running until the 20 March 2017 and the online survey can be found at: <https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/82QQ7T7>. The charity would like to encourage all those that might be affected to complete the questionnaire so that their opinions are heard.

In England, prescriptions for gluten free food are not free of charge unless someone already qualifies for free prescriptions. Currently 81% of CCGs across the country allow access to gluten free food on prescriptions.

Ends

¹ National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2015) NG20 Coeliac disease: recognition, assessment and management, Appendix G: Full health economics report

² Burden, M., et al., (2015) Cost and availability of gluten-free food in the UK: in store and online. Postgraduate Medical Journal, 2015: p. postgradmedj-2015-133395

Notes to editor

- Coeliac disease is a serious illness where the body’s immune system reacts to gluten found in food, making the body attack itself.
- 1 in 100 people in the UK has coeliac disease
- A wide range of case studies are available on request from Coeliac UK.
- Average time to diagnosis is 13 years.
- 1 in 4 people diagnosed with coeliac disease had previously been diagnosed with IBS.
- Gluten is a protein found in wheat (including spelt), rye and barley. Some people are also sensitive to oats. Obvious sources of gluten include breads, pastas, flours, cereals, cakes and biscuits. It is often used as an ingredient in many favourite foods such as fish fingers, sausages, gravies, sauces and soy sauce.

- Coeliac UK has a Helpline on 0333 332 2033 and further information can be found at www.coeliac.org.uk

* Comparative costs for gluten-free bread and gluten containing bread as of 13 February 2017

Gluten-free loaf	Price per 100g	Price per loaf
Tesco-free from white sliced (400g)	£0.38	£1.50
Tesco-free from fresh bread (550g) (white or brown)	£0.36	£2.00
Asda free from white sliced bread (400g)	£0.38	£1.50
Sainsbury's free from sliced (400g) white	£0.38	£1.50
Sainsbury's free from brown sliced loaf (400g)	£0.50	£2.00

Compared to gluten containing

Gluten containing loaf	Price per 100g	Price per loaf
Tesco everyday value bread (800g) (white or brown)	£0.05	£0.36
Tesco bread (800g) (white or bread)	£0.06	£0.50
Asda Baker's Selection (800g) white or brown	£0.06	£0.50
Asda Extra Special Farmhouse loaf (800g) white or brown	£0.11	£0.85
Sainsbury's basics bread (800g) white or brown	£0.05	£0.36
Sainsbury's bread (800g) white	£0.05	£0.42
Sainsbury's bread (800g) wholemeal	£0.06	£0.50
Waitrose essential (800g) white or brown	£0.06	£0.50
Waitrose bread (800g) sliced white bread	£0.13	£1.00

Note: for Morrisons and Waitrose customers there is not an own brand gluten-free version. Genius bread (gluten-free) is available at £2.70 for a 535g loaf (£0.51 per 100g) or Warburtons gluten-free is available at £3.00 for a 560g loaf (£0.54 per 100g)