



**Press Release**

**Immediate Issue: 4 July 2017**

**Cuts to gluten free prescriptions by Bexley CCG  
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 across Bexley following the announcement of a consultation by NHS Bexley CCG and is concerned, if approved, that it will result in health inequality and have a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable.

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 government has recently closed a national consultation on gluten free prescribing, the charity's full response to that consultation can be read [here](#).

Chief executive of Coeliac UK Sarah Sleet said: "The national consultation has now ended but a decision has not yet been made. Surely Bexley CCG's decision to consult on gluten free prescribing locally, is not a good use of public money when this is currently under review at a national level - with their results due to be published in the autumn."

"According to Bexley CCG, they spent a total of £450,090 on prescribed gluten free foods last year, which appears to be significantly above the national average. So rather than leaping to complete removal of the gluten free prescribing, if the CCG ensured their prescribing practice met national norms, significant savings may be made and a service still provided to those diagnosed with coeliac disease," said Ms Sleet.

There is an economic case for retaining access to gluten free prescribing in primary care. National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE) Health Economic analysis estimates the basic cost of gluten free food on prescription is £194.24 per patient per year [1] making it an extremely low cost treatment in the management of coeliac disease. By contrast, treatment of an osteoporotic hip fracture costs on average £27,000 [2] – the equivalent to 138 years of prescribing gluten free staples for an individual.

“Given around 40% of adults with coeliac disease have osteoporosis or osteopenia at diagnosis there is a real risk that short term savings will result in long term expense.”

“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. The removal of access to gluten free core staples on prescription has a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable. With lack of availability in convenience and budget stores, which are often used by the most disadvantaged, and high prices putting them beyond the reach of many on low or fixed incomes” said Ms Sleet.”

To highlight the impact of removal of access to gluten free food on prescription, the charity has calculated that the lowest income households’ weekly expenditure on food and non-alcoholic drink may increase by **25%**. Based on ONS statistics, in 2015/16 households with the lowest income spent on average £40 a week on food and non-alcoholic drink or 17% of their total weekly expenditure (£235) [3]. Research shows that approximately 70% of people who have already lost access to gluten free foods on prescription, report their weekly shopping bill increasing by an average £10 [4].

“Using the ONS statistics, the impact of this increased expenditure for households with the lowest income means that they are now spending 21% of their total weekly expenditure on food and non-alcoholic drink, up from 17% which clearly demonstrates how withdrawing access to gluten free foods on prescription accelerates inequality,” said Ms Sleet.

In May 2017, the cheapest gluten free loaf of bread cost 36.4p per 100g – compared to gluten containing bread which cost 4.4p per 100g. Those shopping for the cheapest gluten free loaf will be paying more than 8 times the price. For example, a woman of pension age annual spend on the cheapest gluten free bread would be £87.60 per annum compared to just £10.54 for gluten containing bread. See [here](#) for further details and examples on costs.

“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.

Bexley CCG’s consultation is running until the 2 August 2017 and the online survey can be found at: <http://www.bexleyccg.nhs.uk/Have%20your%20say/self-care-proposal.htm>. 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 around 78% of CCGs across the country allow access to gluten free food on prescriptions.

Ends

For more information or interviews please contact  
Kate Newman [kate.newman@coeliac.org.uk](mailto:kate.newman@coeliac.org.uk) or tel: 07952 071014

1. NICE, NG20 Coeliac disease; recognition, assessment and management Appendix G HE Report. 2015.
2. NICE, Clinical Guideline CG124: The management of hip fractures in adults. 2011.
3. Office for National Statistics, Family spending in the UK: financial year ending March 2016. 2016.
4. Violato, M., Humanistic and Economic Burden of coeliac disease in the UK, a follow up study. As yet unpublished.

### 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](http://www.coeliac.org.uk)