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The cost of living crisis = a cost of health crisis

Coeliac UK report calling on the food industry to make gluten free food more affordable

As the cost of living crisis continues, many people are struggling. This has been exacerbated for people with coeliac disease, a serious autoimmune condition where the only current treatment is a medically prescribed gluten free diet.

In light of this, Coeliac UK has released its report: *The gluten free diet – How much does it cost and why does it matter?* to raise awareness of the additional challenges being faced by the coeliac community.

Coeliac UK is calling on members of the public, policy makers, healthcare professionals and food industry to pledge their support for the charity's campaign against the high cost of gluten free food. **#GFCostPledge**

For more information, please visit: www.coeliac.org.uk/cost-gf-food

The report reveals a weekly gluten free food shop can be as much as **20% more expensive** than a standard weekly food shop. A gluten free loaf of bread is on average **4.3 times more expensive** than a standard gluten containing loaf and there is even more disparity between the cheapest products, with the cheapest gluten free loaf of bread **costing 7.2 times more** than the cheapest gluten containing loaf.

When these differences are looked at on an annual basis, based on typical bread consumption, the annual cost for white and brown/seeded bread for someone on a gluten free diet compared with someone on a gluten containing diet is **£171 versus £41**.¹

Consumers will also pay on average double for gluten free staple substitutes, such as crackers (2.5 times more), bread rolls (2.3 times more), plain flour (2.1 times more), pasta (1.9 times more) and cereal bars (1.8 times more).

Some have unfairly suggested people with coeliac disease just eat alternatives like rice and potatoes but it's not as simple as that. Gluten free substitute foods have a key role in replacing those gluten containing foods that are typical of the UK diet and are important for both practical reasons and their nutritional content. For instance, eating rice or potatoes instead of bread can reduce iron and calcium intake by up to 96% and 93% respectively. This is particularly important as people with coeliac disease are recommended to have a higher intake of calcium compared with the general population, due to previous or potential ongoing malabsorption.

¹ Using individual bread consumption data for an adult under 65 years, taken from the National Diet and Nutrition Survey and Coeliac Disease Nutrition Survey.

The report also reveals there are limited variety and budget options for all gluten free products, which puts a disproportionate burden on those with the lowest incomes. Higher prices for gluten free bread and staple products can have a significant impact on the cost of the weekly food shop. This would be a challenge at the best of times but in the context of a cost of living crisis, it raises concerns that many people with coeliac disease could struggle to afford their gluten free diet, the only treatment for the condition. According to the Government, the poorest 10% of the UK population normally only spends £22.45 per week on their food shopping, which is insufficient to ensure the diet is adequately nutritious.

There is concern amongst medical professionals that the increased cost of gluten free options makes it much harder for those with coeliac disease to maintain the strict gluten free diet they need to manage their condition.

Dr Jeremy Woodward, Consultant Gastroenterologist, Addenbrooke's Hospital, said: "At a time when the cost of living is rising and people are necessarily having to identify any possible savings, the added expense of having a diagnosis of coeliac disease may become unaffordable, especially for the most disadvantaged in our society."

Dr Peter Gillett, Consultant Paediatric Gastroenterologist at the Royal Hospital for Sick Children, Edinburgh and Chair of the Coeliac Disease Working Group, BSPGHAN added: "With the current cost of living crisis and child poverty increasing over the last 15 years, I am extremely worried for children who are being diagnosed with the condition in that families will struggle to maintain a gluten free diet for them and the consequences of not adhering strictly will potentially not be discovered until later in life."

Tristan Humphreys, Head of Advocacy at Coeliac UK, commented:

"As the cost of living crisis shows no sign of abating, Coeliac UK has heard from concerned members who are struggling to be able to afford to buy gluten free food and worried about the impact this might have on their health. As food insecurity increases, the cost of living crisis could become a cost of health crisis for many.

"For those with a diagnosis of coeliac disease, following a strict gluten free diet is not a choice but is a medically prescribed diet and is essential for their health. Our report reveals that people with coeliac disease are being disproportionately affected - a weekly food shop can cost as much as 20% more for an individual with coeliac disease, which can be an even greater burden for families with more than one person diagnosed.

"We're calling on policy makers and the food industry to join with us to help support those with coeliac disease and ensure they can access the food they need to treat their condition."

Joy Whelan, Gastroenterology Advanced Practitioner (Dietetics), Shantallow Health Centre, Derry, commented: "To consider that the cheapest gluten free loaf of bread is over seven times more expensive than the cheapest gluten containing loaf is shocking. It is important that food industries work on ways to achieve improved affordability but also essential that the health service's supply of prescribable products continue to help people manage their medical condition".

To read the full report - *The gluten free diet – How much does it cost and why does it matter?* and to find out more about Coeliac UK's mission to make gluten free food more affordable and more accessible please visit: www.coeliac.org.uk/cost-gf-food

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Notes to Editors

About *The gluten free diet – How much does it cost and why does it matter?* report

- Coeliac UK undertook research to compare the prices of gluten free products and their gluten containing equivalents across UK major supermarkets. The analysis included data sourced from seven different supermarket websites but only five of these provided sufficient information beyond examining the cost of bread; for the range of substitute products and the weekly food shop, five supermarkets were used.
- The research was completed between March – December 2022
- Historical data from a previous Coeliac UK costing project was also used
- To calculate the impact on a weekly shop, Coeliac UK adapted Loughborough University's Centre for Research in Social Policy's food shopping basket and collected data from five supermarkets on 11 October 2022
- BSPGHAN – British Society of Paediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition
- Coeliac disease is estimated to affect 1 in 100 people in the general population of the UK, however for first degree relatives of a person diagnosed with coeliac disease the risk increases to 1 in 10.

About Coeliac UK:

For over 50 years, Coeliac UK has been the expert on coeliac disease and the gluten free diet. We are an independent charity helping people living without gluten to live happier, healthier lives. We do this by providing trustworthy advice and support, funding critical research into coeliac disease, working with healthcare professionals to improve diagnosis and fighting for better availability of gluten free food. And we do it all so that one day, no one's life will be limited by gluten.

For more information visit: www.coeliac.org.uk

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