

Press Release

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CUTS TO GLUTEN-FREE PRESCRIPTIONS BY NHS WIRRAL CCG COULD COST THE NHS MORE IN THE LONG RUN

Coeliac UK is strongly opposing the proposed cuts to gluten-free prescriptions by the NHS Wirral Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG).

The charity is concerned these cuts will leave vulnerable patients with coeliac disease without support which will affect their ability to stick to the gluten-free diet. 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.

NHS Wirral CCG is currently consulting with local patients and carers about their views on whether to continue to prescribe gluten-free foods in the area with the consultation running until the 14 August 2016. The online survey for can be completed at: www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/D2VNXLY. The charity would like to encourage all those that might be affected to complete the questionnaire so that their opinions are heard.

Coeliac disease is a serious autoimmune condition caused by a reaction to gluten, a protein found in wheat, barley and rye. Gluten-free food such as bread which is a staple in the diet is three to four times more expensive* than gluten-containing counterparts and availability is limited in rural areas, discount supermarkets and small stores. Having access to gluten-free staple foods on prescription provides an essential level of support to individuals trying to keep to the gluten-free diet which is the only treatment for coeliac disease.

The National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE) estimates that the cost of gluten-free food to the NHS equates to £194.24 per diagnosed patient per year, making it an extremely low cost treatment. Last year, NHS Wirral CCG spent approximately £161,000 on gluten-free foods for both adults and children. Patients with coeliac disease have to pay for their prescriptions for gluten-free food unless they already qualify for free prescriptions.

Sarah Sleet, chief executive of Coeliac UK, the national charity for people with coeliac disease said: "The suggestion by Wirral CCG to partially or completely cut gluten-free prescription services for everyone 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.”

Currently 64% of CCGs across the country adhere to National Prescribing Guidelines, providing recommendations for GPs and policymakers on reasonable amounts of gluten-free staple foods such as bread, flour and pasta per patient per month.

Coeliac UK is also concerned over misleading comments by the CCG's where it states:

‘NHS Wirral CCG spends approximately £161k per annum on gluten free foods, many of which are readily available at all supermarkets, with a wide variety of choice. GP prescribing of food products is not supported for other disease area such as diabetes.’

“We do not believe that clinical commissioners should mislead the public implying that one patient group is receiving support at the expense of another. Further, food is available to other patient groups, such as those with phenylketonuria (PKU) who require a low protein diet. Also in the case of people with diabetes the NHS clinical guidance specifically states that these patients require a normal balanced diet and diabetic products are unnecessary, a fact which is also supported by Diabetes UK,” said Ms Sleet.”

“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 not as easy as you might think. The expansion of Free From aisles in large supermarkets masks the reality of very patchy provision. In particular, small stores and budget supermarkets have little, if any, gluten-free staples. Additionally, high prices make such products unaffordable for some. Both these issues put those the most in need at risk – those on a limited budget or with limited mobility,” continued Ms Sleet.

Ends

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 4 July 2016

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
Asda free from brown sliced bread (550g)	£0.27	£1.50
Sainsbury's free from sliced (400g) white or brown	£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	£0.40
Tesco bread (800g) (white or bread)	£0.06	£0.50
Asda Baker's Selection (800g) white or brown	£0.06	£0.50
Asda chosen by you (800g) wholemeal	£0.09	£0.75
Sainsbury's basics bread (800g) white or brown	£0.05	£0.40
Sainsbury's bread (800g) white or brown	£0.06	£0.45
Waitrose essential (800g) white or brown	£0.06	£0.45
Waitrose bread (800g) white or wholegrain	£0.17	£1.35

Note: for Morrison and Waitrose customers there is not an own brand gluten-free version. Genius bread (gluten-free) is available at £2.90 for a 535g loaf (£0.54 per 100g) or Warburtons gluten-free is available at £3.00 for a 560g loaf (£0.54 per 100g)