

Press Release

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

Coeliac UK is strongly opposing the proposed cuts to gluten-free prescriptions by St Helens Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) for patients in the region diagnosed with coeliac disease.

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.

The CCG is currently consulting with local patients and carers about their views on a number of issues including whether to continue to prescribe staple gluten-free foods in the area with a consultation running until 5th October 2016. The link to the online survey is: www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/ZZ7G5ZV. 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.

The charity refutes the claim by NHS St Helens CCG where in their consultation document it states:

“Today the availability of gluten-free foods has increased dramatically.”

Sarah Sleet, chief executive of Coeliac UK, the national charity for people with coeliac disease 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 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.”

Gram for gram, gluten-free bread is six times more expensive* than regular gluten containing bread in the supermarket. Whilst other gluten-free food staples such as pasta, are 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, St Helens CCG spent approximately £103,000 on gluten-free foods for both adults and children.

“The proposal by St Helens CCG to remove 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. The CCG states in its consultation papers that gluten is not essential in people’s diets and can be replaced by other foods. However, simple switching to alternative carbs 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.

In England, prescriptions for gluten-free food are not free of charge unless someone already qualifies for free prescriptions. Currently 63% 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.

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)