

**Press Release**

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**Coeliac UK fundamentally opposes the complete removal of access to  
gluten free food on prescription**

Coeliac UK, the largest independent charity for people with coeliac disease, today (5 June 2017) publishes its response to the Department of Health's consultation on the availability of gluten free foods on prescription.

The charity's full response can be read [here](#), the deadline for the government's [open consultation](#) is midday on 22<sup>nd</sup> June.

Coeliac UK welcomes the NHS consultation which offers the chance of a national approach to providing gluten free foods on prescription, in contrast to the postcode lottery facing patients across England today. It is essential that clinicians retain the option of providing support to vulnerable patients trying to maintain their lifelong gluten free diet with an agreed range of gluten free staple foods on prescription.

The charity is fundamentally opposed to the complete removal of access to gluten free food on prescription, as proposed in one of the consultation's options, which would remove the safety net for vulnerable patients putting them at risk of the serious health complications such as osteoporosis which may result from not keeping to a strict gluten free diet. This will cost the NHS more in the long run.

Chief executive of Coeliac UK Sarah Sleet said: "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]. 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."

"What's more, 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 used by the most disadvantaged and high prices putting them beyond the reach of many on low or fixed incomes," she continued.

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]. See [here](#) for further details on costs.

"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 addition, Public Health England recommends that starchy carbohydrates (e.g. bread, cereals and pasta) should make up 50% of our diet. What many people don't realise is that bread and other cereal products are also key sources of essential nutrients like iron and calcium. They contribute 44% of total daily iron intake – more than meat products - and 30% total daily calcium intake to the diet – the second biggest source behind milk products [5]. The removal of these foods could significantly impact the nutritional adequacy of the diet and the consultation document does not recognise the complexity of managing this. For example, replacing 72g gluten free bread with a portion of rice containing the same amount of calories would reduce the iron content by 96% and the calcium content by 90%," continued Ms Sleet.

"Gluten free prescribing has been subject to much ill-informed comment about the gluten free diet and unsubstantiated statements about access to gluten free products. It is essential that NHS policy is based on facts and not anecdotal assertions. Looked at objectively, patients with a lifelong autoimmune disease should be supported by clinicians who are able to use gluten free prescribing as a cost effective intervention to protect the most vulnerable."

Coeliac disease is a lifelong autoimmune disease for which the only treatment is the complete removal of gluten from the diet. The consequences of not maintaining a strict gluten free diet are serious with complications such as malnutrition, osteoporosis, a rare type of bowel cancer, and reduced spleen function which can reduce the immune response [6]. For children, non-adherence to the diet can have additional consequences including faltering growth and delayed puberty [7].

## References

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.
5. Henderson, L.I., et al, National Diet and Nutrition Survey: adults aged 19 - 64 years vitamin and mineral intake and urinary analytes. 2003
6. NICE, NG20 Coeliac disease; recognition, assessment and management. 2015.
7. Murch, S., et al., Joint BSPGHAN and Coeliac UK guidelines for the diagnosis and management of coeliac disease in children. Arch Dis Child, 2013. 98(10): p. 806-11

**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
- 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.
- In England, prescriptions for gluten free food are not free of charge unless someone already qualifies for free prescriptions
- 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)