

BRIEFING FOR MPS

Access to gluten free food on prescription in England

Key points

1. Coeliac disease is a serious medical condition where the body's immune system attacks its own tissues when gluten is eaten. The only medical treatment for coeliac disease is strict adherence to a gluten free diet for life. Since the late 1960s staple gluten free foods have been prescribed within the NHS to support dietary adherence. Despite improvements in availability of gluten free foods in the supermarkets real difficulties remain in accessing staple products both because of the high cost of gluten free staple foods and the poor availability in budget supermarkets and corner shops. In addition, simply replacing products such as breads with naturally gluten free options is hard and very difficult to match nutritionally. More information on why access to gluten free food on prescription is available at www.coeliac.org.uk/supportingevidence.
2. Since 2015, a number of CCGs in England have been challenging this rationale. The reason cited is, almost universally, the need for CCGs to make savings to their prescribing budgets. Many CCGs have reviewed their policies and a significant number have removed this vital support for patients with coeliac disease. This has created a postcode lottery for patients with coeliac disease in England. For further information on the current status of gluten free prescribing in England see our prescribing map (www.coeliac.org.uk/prescribingmap).
3. The desire for a national approach in England has been stated by a number of organisations:
 - a. Lauren Hughes, Director, Clinical Policy and Operations, NHS England *"The purpose of this review is to develop guidance at a national level that will support CCGs locally to manage their resources and reduce the differing approaches and regional variation in prescribing across England."*
 - b. Julie Wood, Chief Executive, NHS Clinical Commissioners *"Having national support from NHS England and the DH for those local decisions means there will be more consistency and reduce variation for patients."*
4. In 2017, the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) undertook a significant piece of work to review their position on prescribing of gluten free foods in England. The review included a national consultation that provided three options, ending the prescribing of gluten free foods in primary care, continuing to prescribe gluten free foods and limiting the range of gluten free foods that may be prescribed.

In February 2018 the outcome of the consultation was announced with the decision to continue access to gluten free food on prescription but limit the products to gluten free breads and flour mixes. The consultation received almost 8000 responses from a range of stakeholders including people with coeliac disease, clinicians and their representative professional bodies. The Department also carried out an extensive impact assessment that considered the health costs of untreated coeliac disease both to the NHS and the patients. Further work is required to inform and develop the final regulations around this decision.

5. Following the comprehensive review by the DHSC, we are asking for your support to challenge CCG gluten free prescribing policies that are more restrictive and bring them in line with the national approach that has been agreed by the Government, to end the current postcode lottery and protect vulnerable patients. Adherence to the gluten free diet is the only way of managing coeliac disease and preventing further ill health related to the disease.

The case for continuing access to gluten free food on prescription

Our case for the continuation of access to prescriptions is set out in our response to the Department of Health consultation (www.coeliac.org.uk/dohconsultationresponse). In summary, we believe that access to gluten free food on prescription is essential for a number of reasons:

- the importance of gluten free substitute foods aiding adherence to a gluten free diet and contributing to nutritional requirements.
- the higher cost of gluten free foods, in particular gluten free bread which is five times the cost (gram for gram) of gluten containing bread and more than 8 times the cost if you compare the cheapest breads.
- the issues around availability of gluten free foods affecting those with limited mobility and those with only access to budget and convenience stores.
- the disproportionate impact the removal of gluten free prescribing would have on those on low or fixed incomes, with mobility problems and in families where more than one member is affected.
- the duty on the Secretary of State and NHS Board to reduce health inequalities.
- and the need to safeguard vulnerable patients so that the policy enables access to continuing support, in individual cases of need, to prevent complex health problems.

Further information

For more information, please contact norma.mcgough@coeliac.org.uk