

Gluten-free guidelines – common questions

Why have you stopped funding gluten-free foods?

We need to use our prescribing budget for medicines where it can do most good. We have therefore decided to concentrate funds on products which cannot be bought over the counter.

The variety and accessibility of gluten-free products in supermarkets has improved dramatically. Faced with competing funding demands, we have decided that we can no longer fund gluten free foods on prescription, other than a limited list for those coeliac patients aged under 18.

Why have you ignored the views put to you on this subject in recent months?

All views have been considered but their diversity led us to conclude that no approach would carry overwhelming support. As a result, we consulted with our GPs and some 70 percent of the 100 plus responding supported a complete restriction of gluten free products being applied for patients aged 18 and over and the prescription of a limited range of gluten free products being available to those aged under 18s only.

Why have you not consulted on this latest decision?

Having spoken with lots of people, groups, organisations and GPs, we decided that fresh consultation was unlikely to surface any additional views which would change the decision.

If people can't afford gluten free products it could cost the NHS more in treatment?

Gluten free products are more expensive but that is not a reason for the NHS to fund them through prescriptions. We hope that most people would make wise dietary choices so as to avoid being ill.

Why are you prescribing only bread, pasta and flour for under 18s?

We are funding bread as it is considered a staple UK food; pasta because it is a common 'fast-food' in many people's diets and not easy to make; flour (including multipurpose flour and bread mixes) so people can cook or bake other foods.

Why are you no longer funding biscuits, cakes, etc?

These are recognized as treats and are not part of an everyday healthy diet. For the NHS to prescribe these would be at odds with national health messages.

Is this decision just about money?

As everyone knows, public finances are under severe pressure and it is essential that NHS funds are spent where they can bring most benefit. We cannot ignore these financial pressures but our goal is to make decisions based on a wide range of factors so as to have the most positive overall health impact on the people of South Devon and Torbay.

Some areas have set up schemes allowing people to get their gluten-free products straight from their pharmacy without a prescription – why can't you do this?

We could do this but it would not save any money. We would still have to pay the pharmacies for the items provided. The Prescription Pricing Authority currently arranges payments to pharmacies on our behalf. However, if we were to stop using prescriptions and supply straight from the pharmacy, we would have to set up administration locally to deal with the payments, which would actually add to the cost. We do not currently have the resources locally to set this up.

Are there no other ways in which the NHS could save money?

We are constantly looking for ways to save money without having a negative impact on patient care. As demand increases, we need to do things differently, because the smallest changes can make a big difference. The basis of this policy is not to penalise those who suffer from coeliac disease, but to provide some support to under18s towards the increased cost of maintaining a gluten-free diet, to the extent that the average weekly food bill would be similar to that of the rest of our population.

Coeliac patients are not alone – there are frequently restrictions on the range of items that can be supplied under the NHS, whether prescription items or others. Another such example is the provision of basic spectacle frames, where more expensive frames are not available.

If you have any comments or queries relating to this information, please contact

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