

# Guidance for the prescribing of gluten free foods on NHS prescriptions in primary care

## Introduction

Gluten free (GF) foods are available on NHS prescription to patients diagnosed with gluten sensitivity enteropathies, including coeliac disease. Gluten free foods are readily available in supermarkets, health food shops and online. A wider range of naturally GF food types are now available, so the ability of patients to obtain these foods without a prescription has greatly increased. This guidance addresses the balance between helping patients afford the higher cost of GF diets and ensuring the fair and effective use of NHS resources. This guidance is **not** intended to replace specialist advice or clinical management.

## Recommendations

- Only patients with coeliac disease, dermatitis herpetiformis and established gluten-sensitive enteropathies (including steatorrhoea due to gluten sensitivity) should be prescribed gluten free foods. Prescriptions should be clearly marked **ACBS**.
- Gluten free foods (including branded products) not included in Part XV of the Drug Tariff (Borderline Substances) should **not** be prescribed.
- Gluten free bread, rolls, baguettes and all flour type mixes (excluding cake mixes) **can be prescribed** up to the maximum levels indicated in table 2 (page 3).
- Gluten free pasta, pizza bases, grains/flours, cooking aids, sweet and savoury biscuits (including crackers and crispbreads), cereals, cakes and cake mixes should **not be prescribed**.
- Gluten free foods should be issued as an **acute** prescription following initial diagnosis. Once preferences have been established, relevant items can be issued as a **repeat** prescription, with a 3 monthly review.
- Supply should be limited to **1 month** at a time for all patients.
- Patients are not entitled to exemption from prescription charges on the basis of a gluten enteropathy (unless exempt for another reason), however, they can apply for pre-payment certificates.

## Rationale

Following a public consultation by the DHSC it has been agreed to reduce the type of GF foods available on prescription in England to bread and mixes only. Changes to the National Health Service (General Medical Services Contracts), (Prescription of Drugs etc), (Amendment) Regulations 2018 for the prescribing of gluten free foods in England came into force in December 2018. Alongside these amendments, changes have also been made to the Drug Tariff Part XV (Borderline Substances) to exclude GF products in the categories of biscuits, cereals, cooking aids, grains/flours, pizza bases and pasta.

## Background

People with gluten-sensitive enteropathies, must avoid all foods which contain gluten, a protein found in wheat, rye and barley. The Department of Health, through the Advisory Committee on Borderline Substances (ACBS) supports the prescribing of GF foods only for patients diagnosed with the following established gluten sensitive enteropathies in order to promote compliance to a restricted diet and to ensure appropriate nutritional requirements are met.

### ACBS indications:

- Coeliac disease
- Dermatitis herpetiformis
- Established gluten-sensitive enteropathies including steatorrhoea due to gluten sensitivity.

### Gluten free foods should NOT be prescribed for any other conditions, such as:

- Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS), which is a chronic non-inflammatory condition characterised by abdominal pain, bloating and change in bowel habit.
- Wheat intolerance - some people with IBS find that their symptoms are made worse by eating wheat. Reducing the wheat content of the diet may improve symptoms but there is no need to remove other gluten containing foods from the diet.

### Availability and costs

Historically, availability of GF foods was low, therefore obtaining these products from community pharmacies via prescriptions improved access to them. However, with the increased awareness of coeliac disease and gluten sensitivity as well as a general trend towards eating less gluten, GF foods are now much easier and accessible to purchase. A wide and expanding range of GF foods are now available from supermarkets, health food shops and online. Many coeliac disease patients can, and do, alter their diet and replace bread with naturally GF foods such as rice or potatoes rather than trying to substitute with specially manufactured GF products, and thus reducing potential cost impact. Coeliac UK has produced a useful patient friendly checklist that provides details on which foods are GF.

<https://www.coeliac.org.uk/document-library/126-gluten-free-checklist/gluten-free-checklist-web.pdf>

In supermarkets, some GF foods are more expensive than the gluten containing equivalents, however, the price paid by the NHS for GF foods on prescription is much higher than supermarket prices and in some cases it may be twice as expensive.

### Coeliac disease

This is an autoimmune disorder that involves a heightened immunological response to ingested gluten in genetically susceptible people. Patients who are diagnosed as having coeliac disease should follow a strict GF diet. Failure to do so may cause gastric symptoms. Long term complications include various malabsorption states such as anaemia, osteoporosis (due to malabsorption of calcium), lymphoma and fertility problems. NICE (NG20) advises that patients should **not** start a GF diet or be prescribed GF foods until diagnosis is confirmed by a specialist, even if the results of a serological test are positive.

### Dermatitis herpetiformis

This is a skin manifestation of coeliac disease. Typical symptoms are red, itchy raised patches, often with blisters that burst with scratching. Even though patients may not report gut symptoms, most patients with dermatitis herpetiformis will have gut damage consistent with coeliac disease.

## Gluten free food prescribing

**Table 1. Categories of ACBS-approved GF foods**

Recommendation level	Types of GF food	When to prescribe
<b>Staple</b>	Bread, rolls, baguettes All flour type mixes <sup>a</sup> (except cake mixes).	All patients with a diagnosis of gluten-sensitive enteropathies, including steatorrhoea due to gluten sensitivity, coeliac disease and dermatitis herpetiformis.
Can be prescribed. Use the monthly maximum number of units (table 2) to guide prescribing.		
<b>Not recommended</b>	Pasta, pizza bases, crackers, crispbreads, cereals, sweet and savoury biscuits (including crackers and crispbreads), cakes and cake mixes.	Prescribing <b>not</b> recommended.
It is reasonable that coeliac patients should purchase some GF foods themselves. Some of these items do not fall in line with healthy eating recommendations and/or are not considered necessary within an individual's diet.		

<sup>a</sup> Gluten free mixes can be used at home to make a variety of foods.

**Table 2. Recommended units of GF foods (adapted from Coeliac UK)**

Age group and gender	Suggested number of total units per month <sup>b</sup>
Child 1-10 years	8
Child 11-18 years	12
Male 19 years and older	12
Female 19 years and older	8
Breastfeeding	Add 4 extra units
3rd trimester pregnancy	Add 1 extra unit

<sup>b</sup>The actual amount of GF food a patient will need each month will depend on how much carbohydrate they consume from other sources such as rice and potatoes. Please note that individual patient needs require consideration and there may be exceptional circumstances where different quantities of these items are appropriate e.g. malnourished patients.

**Table 3. Number of units for different GF foods (adapted from Coeliac UK)**

Food item	Weight	Number of units
Bread/rolls/baguettes	400g	1
Bread/flour mix	500g	2
Please note the below foods are <b>not</b> recommended for prescribing but may be purchased by the patient from supermarkets. The amount of these foods purchased by the patient should be taken into account when calculating the total number of units required per month.		
Breakfast cereals	300g	1.5
Oats	500g	1.5
Pasta	250g	1
Pizza bases	220-360g	1
Savoury biscuits/crackers	200g	1
Xanthan gum	100-170g	1

## Advice for practices

- Patients currently prescribed the following GF foods should have their prescription reviewed: GF pasta, pizza bases, cereals, sweet and savoury biscuits (including crackers and crispbreads), cakes, cake mixes and luxury items.
- Patients who appear to be requesting significantly more than the recommended amount shown on table 2, should be contacted and informed that the number of units prescribed may be adjusted to ensure quantities are in line with requirements of a healthy diet.
- Practices should **not** prescribe more than the recommended quantities of GF foods (see tables 2 and 3), taking into account patient's age, gender and physical activity, and adjusting quantities as required during pregnancy and breastfeeding.
- Gluten free foods should be issued as an acute prescription following initial diagnosis, once preferences have been established relevant items can be issued as a repeat prescription, with a 3 monthly review.
- Prescriptions should not generally be for periods in excess of **1 month**.

## Advice for patients

- Patients are able to purchase (in supermarkets, health food shops and online) any additional quantities or items not recommended.
- Advise patients to prevent wastage by making sure they collect the prescription items they have ordered and do not order more than they can use or store before it goes out of date.
- Patients should be reminded that the prescribed foods are for their own use only, and should not be shared with members of the family / household or friends.
- Advise patients that when fresh GF bread is prescribed to freeze surplus quantities immediately upon receipt as fresh GF bread deteriorates rapidly if stored at room temperature.
- Patients should be advised to reduce their intake of cakes, biscuits and sugary treats in line with the advice from the national campaign for healthy eating.

## Resources for patients

- Coeliac UK at <https://www.coeliac.org.uk/home/>
- Change 4 Life at <https://www.nhs.uk/change4life>

## References

- PrescQIPP bulletin 225 (November 2019). Guidance on the prescribing of gluten-free foods. Available at <https://www.prescqipp.info/our-resources/bulletins/bulletin-225-gluten-free-foods/>
- Department of Health and Social Care. Gluten-free food prescribing consultation: report of responses (January 2018). Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/availability-of-gluten-free-foods-on-nhs-prescription>
- NHS England. Prescribing Gluten-Free Foods in Primary Care: Guidance for CCGs (November 2018). Available at: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/publication/prescribing-gluten-free-foods-in-primary-care-guidance-for-ccgs/>
- NICE guideline [NG20]. Coeliac disease: recognition, assessment and management (September 2015). Available at <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng20>
- Coeliac UK. National Prescribing Guidelines. Available at: <https://www.coeliac.org.uk/information-and-support/coeliac-disease/once-diagnosed/prescriptions/national-prescribing-guidelines/> (accessed 19/12/2019)