

Press release: 13/07/2022

## **GOVERNMENT COULD SAVE €234.4M PER YEAR ON HEALTHCARE BY INCREASING AWARENESS AND DIAGNOSIS OF COELIAC DISEASE**

### **Calls for reintroduction of Dietary Supplement for Social Welfare recipients**

- Coeliac society calls for reopening of special Dietary Supplement
- New research shows estimated 76,500 people with condition in Ireland – previously underestimated by 26,500
- Those on social welfare less likely to be diagnosed

The Coeliac Society of Ireland has said the Government could make savings of €243m<sup>1</sup> per year in healthcare costs by increasing awareness and diagnosis of coeliac disease and reopening the Dietary Supplement payment.

In its pre-budget submission, the Society said the savings could be made if coeliac sufferers are identified and placed on a strict gluten free diet to prevent associated conditions like intestinal cancers, type 1 diabetes, infertility and miscarriage, and osteoporosis occurring during their lifetime.

The Society also notes that the lack of a dedicated coeliac register in Ireland means that the number of sufferers has been underestimated by as many as 26,500 for many years. Following research in Finland,<sup>2</sup> which has a coeliac register and a similar demographic to Ireland, the Society has conservatively revised its figures from a potential of 50,000 coeliac sufferers in Ireland to 76,500.

Currently only 13,000 are thought to be diagnosed coeliac in Ireland. This means that an estimated 63,500 people are living with undiagnosed coeliac disease and are at risk of serious ill health.

In their Budget submission, the Coeliac Society also calls for the Government to reopen the Dietary Supplement. The scheme – which is a payment to help with the cost of a special diet prescribed by a doctor or hospital consultant – was discontinued for new applicants in 2014 by the then Minister for Social Protection, Joan Burton.

Gill Brennan, CEO of the Coeliac Society of Ireland, said: “The lack of a dedicated coeliac register and a shortfall in awareness among medical professionals and the Government about the disease and its long-term health costs, is placing an unnecessary burden on the health services.

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<sup>1</sup> Figure is based on analysis of the percentage of untreated Coeliacs who will develop Cancer, Type 1 Diabetes, Osteoporosis and Infertility, and the mean medical costs associated with treating these diseases. Detailed analysis available on request

<sup>2</sup> Finland, which has a similar population size and demographic to Ireland, has a register of people diagnosed and living with coeliac disease. It shows that up to 2.5% of Finns are coeliacs. In Ireland, it is therefore reasonable to estimate, with a similar population size and make up, and knowing that the number of coeliacs in Ireland is also above the European average. The Coeliac Society of Ireland therefore estimates a median figure of 1.5% of the Irish population have coeliac disease of which an estimated 17% (13,000) are diagnosed.

“We have estimated that more than €243m in cost savings can be made. If potential sufferers are identified and registered in the first place, they can receive the right medical advice and be placed on a proper diet which can prevent associated conditions like intestinal cancers, type 1 diabetes, infertility and miscarriage, and osteoporosis occurring during their lifetime.

“However, even if the HSE and Government do implement a programme of awareness and create a register, it is vital, particularly for the estimated 24,000 sufferers on social welfare, that the dietary supplement allowance is reinstated.

“Coeliac disease is a lifelong autoimmune disease, and the only treatment is a strict gluten free diet. But this is not cheap. A recent study we undertook has shown that some gluten free foods cost up to 75% more than non-gluten free foods and people on social welfare, unlike PAYE workers, have little or no support at all to assist them pay for what is a medically necessary diet.”

The Society notes that those on a lower socio-economic status are less likely to be diagnosed in the first place as there are lower rates of health-seeking behaviour and access to healthcare<sup>3</sup> amongst this group. It believes that an investment of €7.35m per year to support the purchase of gluten-free foods, in combination with a targeted awareness campaign, has the potential to encourage a significant number of people to seek diagnosis and reduce the risk of developing health conditions associated with coeliac disease.

Gill Brennan said: “The Federation of Coeliac Societies” in Spain<sup>4</sup> carried out a survey in March this year and it showed that Ireland continues to be an outlier amongst its EU partners in providing support for coeliac patients who fall outside the PAYE tax system.

“For families on low incomes, treating coeliac disease through a strict gluten free diet can be financially stressful and draining. We estimate that 24,000 social welfare recipients are coeliac and about 14,664 of these will have no dietary supports at all. These individuals will be undiagnosed for the most part and for those who are, they will struggle to afford the gluten free their health depends on.

“The reintroduction of the dietary supplement for these individuals will encourage more to seek help, reduce the burden on the health services, and improve the quality of life amongst an often-marginalised part of our society.”

The full submission is available to view at this [link](#)

<https://coeliac.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Coeliac-Society-of-Ireland-Budget-Submission-2022.pdf>

**ENDS**

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<sup>3</sup> Roy A, Mehra S, Kelly CP, Tariq S, Pallav K, Dennis M, Peer A, Lebwohl B, Green PH, Leffler DA. The association between socioeconomic status and the symptoms at diagnosis of celiac disease: a retrospective cohort study. *Therap Adv Gastroenterol*. 2016 Jul;9(4):495-502. doi: 10.1177/1756283X16637532. Epub 2016 Mar 18. PMID: 27366218; PMCID: PMC4913330.

<sup>4</sup> <https://celiacos.org/ayudas-alimentarias-y-economicas-en-la-union-europea/>

**For further information, images or to arrange an interview, please contact: Richard Burke at 4TC (0868167822) [richard@4tc.ie](mailto:richard@4tc.ie) , or Craig McKechnie [craig@4tc.ie](mailto:craig@4tc.ie) 087 6218839**

#### **Available for interview**

- Gill Brennan, chief executive of the Coeliac Society of Ireland
- Sarah Keogh, nutritionist, and dietitian (MSc. BSc. Dip. MINDI)

#### **Notes for Editor**

- Coeliac disease is an auto-immune disease where the affected individual reacts abnormally when gluten is ingested. The intestine becomes inflamed and damaged resulting in poor absorption of essential nutrients. Gluten is a protein found in many foods including bread, pasta, gravy, soy sauce and beer.
- There is no cure for coeliac disease and the only treatment is a gluten-free diet. Annual medical check-ups are also advised.
- Based on European averages and a recent study In Finland, there are estimated to be around 76,500 people in Ireland with coeliac disease. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that this may be higher in Ireland. There are also thought to be 450,000 people in Ireland who have some form of gluten intolerance.
- It is estimated that there are 62,250 children and adults who are undiagnosed coeliacs
- Symptoms include abdominal pain, recurring mouth-ulcers, weight-loss, vomiting and diarrhoea. If untreated, coeliac disease can affect fertility and lead to other health conditions such as osteoporosis.
- The first step to receiving a diagnosis is to visit your GP for a simple blood test. It is important to be on a gluten containing diet before testing. Eliminating gluten before testing could lead to a false negative test result. If the test is positive, you will be referred to a gastroenterologist for an endoscopy. Once diagnosed, it is advised you visit a dietician to ensure optimum nutrition.