

PRESCRIPTION CHARGES COALITION: MEDIA Q&A

A. GENERAL QUESTIONS

1. Who is the Prescription Charges Coalition?

We are a coalition of 22 organisations representing a range of long-term conditions with the strongly held joint position that Gordon Brown must keep the promise he made to abolish prescription charges for all people with long-term conditions, and that he must do so before the General Election.

The coalition's current membership includes:

- Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome Support Group - www.aissg.org
- Arthritis Care - www.arthritiscare.org.uk
- Association for Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus - www.asbah.org
- Asthma UK - www.asthma.org.uk
- Behcets Syndrome Society - www.behcets.org.uk
- British Heart Foundation - www.bhf.org.uk
- Diabetes UK - www.diabetes.org.uk
- Disability Alliance - www.disabilityalliance.org
- FibroAction - www.fibroaction.org
- Klinefelter's Syndrome Association - www.ksa-uk.co.uk
- Mind - www.mind.org.uk
- Motor Neurone Disease Association - www.mndassociation.org
- MS Society - www.mssociety.org.uk
- National Ankylosing Spondylitis Society - www.nass.co.uk
- National Association for Colitis and Crohn's Disease - www.nacc.org.uk
- National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society - www.rheumatoid.org.uk
- Parkinson's Disease Society - www.parkinsons.org.uk
- Pernicious Anaemia Society - www.pernicious-anaemia-society.org
- Rethink - www.rethink.org
- The Stroke Association - www.stroke.org.uk
- Skin Care Campaign - www.skincarecampaign.org
- Terrence Higgins Trust - www.tht.org.uk

2. Has the Government been reviewing the prescription charging system in England?

In September 2008, the Prime Minister announced his intention to abolish prescription charges for people with long-term conditions in England. On 1 April 2009, prescription charges for cancer patients were abolished. Further to this, Professor Ian Gilmore (President of the Royal College of Physicians) has undertaken a Prescription Charges Review to consider how to define the range

of long-term conditions that should be exempted from prescription charges, and how exemption from charging can best be implemented. This review was completed in late 2009 and presented to Ministers, but has not yet been made public.

3. What is the PCC calling for, and why?

The coalition is calling for all people with long-term conditions to be made exempt from prescription charges before the General Election.

Many people with long-term conditions feel the current prescription charges system is unfair. They often require large numbers of drugs regularly to manage symptoms, prevent their condition from getting worse, prevent the development of long term complications and to treat side effects. Often they must regularly pay for prescriptions their whole life, on top of a range of other costs caused by their condition, and their condition often restricts or prevents their employment. There is a wealth of evidence that large numbers of people cannot afford their prescription charges, and people with long-term conditions are particularly badly affected. A fair solution for these people is urgently needed.

4. So are the Government going to implement free prescriptions for people with long-term conditions?

Time is running out for the Government to implement free prescriptions for people with long-term conditions. If Gordon Brown doesn't pass new legislation within the next few weeks before the election is called, free prescriptions for people with long-term conditions will fail to become a reality before the election and may not happen at all.

5. Recent media coverage suggests Gordon Brown won't implement this before the election and that he will put it in the Labour Manifesto instead. What does the PCC think about this?

If the Labour party decides to put the promise into their manifesto instead of implementing it now, it will be a failure on the part of the Prime Minister to

keep his prescription promise. With Labour behind in the opinion polls and no commitment from the Conservatives on this issue, we are concerned that the millions of people our coalition represents will be let down.

6. What are you doing to put pressure on the Government?

It's imperative that we remind Gordon Brown of his promise and urge the Government to implement prescriptions for people with long-term conditions as soon as possible. We're urging supporters to help us by writing to their MP to ask them to sign the Early Day Motion 306 and put pressure on key-decision makers and to join in with a co-ordinated stunt on 1 February. We are also encouraging our supporters to join in with a co-ordinated stunt on 1 February.

7. How can members of the public support the PCC's campaign?

They can visit the coalition's website (www.prescriptionpromise.org), which will allow them to sign an online petition and email their MP directly in support of the campaign. They are also encouraged to get their friends and family involved in the campaign. People can also support the campaign on Twitter and Facebook.

8. Which groups or conditions are already exempt from prescription charges, and when was the list of exemptions last updated?

In England, the following groups are already exempt from prescription charges: those aged 60 and over; those under 16; those aged 16, 17 or 18 and in full time education; those on Income Support, Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, or Pension Credit Guarantee Credit; and those with a valid exemption certificate for a particular condition. People on low incomes who are not claiming any of the benefits listed can also apply for an NHS Low Income Scheme exemption, using form HC1, available from their local Jobcentre, NHS hospital and sometimes their local GP surgery.

However, people receiving Incapacity Benefit/Employment Support Allowance are not eligible for free prescriptions.

People can apply for exemption certificates on medical grounds if they: are pregnant or have had a baby in the previous twelve months; have a listed medical condition; or have a continuing physical disability which means they can not go out without the help of another person.

The list of exemptions from prescription charges was last updated in 1968, and includes:

- a. A permanent fistula (e.g. caecostomy, colostomy, laryngostomy or ileostomy) which needs continuous surgical dressing or an appliance.
- b. A form of hypoadrenalism (e.g. Addison's Disease) for which specific substitution therapy is essential.
- c. Diabetes insipidus and other forms of hypopituitarism.
- d. Diabetes mellitus, except where treatment is by diet alone.
- e. Hypoparathyroidism.
- f. Myasthenia gravis.
- g. Myxoedema (hypothyroidism which needs thyroid hormone replacement).
- h. Epilepsy which needs continuous anti-convulsive therapy.

9. How do you apply for an exemption certificate?

You should be able to find more information about the NHS form HC11 from your GP surgery. If you qualify because you have one of the exempt conditions you will need to ask your doctor for form FP92A. If you are on a low income but not claiming one of the benefits that allows you automatic entitlement to free prescriptions, you can ask your local Jobcentre, NHS hospital or perhaps your GP for an HC1 form to apply for help with health costs.

10. What is a Pre-Payment Certificate and how much does it cost?

A Pre-Payment Certificate lets you pay a certain amount up front to limit your prescription costs for that quarter or that year. A 3-month PCC will cost £28.25 from 1 April 2009 and a 12-month PCC £104 from 1 April 2009. You can pay by direct debit to spread the cost. Telephone Advice/Order Line 0845 850 0030.

11. What would be defined as a long-term condition?

The coalition is calling for the list of conditions exempted from prescription charges to be extended to cover all long-term conditions. We are defining a long-term condition as either a lifelong condition from the point of diagnosis, or a condition for which the person will require prescriptions for more than six months (including conditions where the level of need for prescriptions fluctuates).

We would also want to include people who need to take preventative medications over the long term to prevent them developing a serious condition (e.g. antihypertensive drugs for cardiovascular disease), as well as people who clearly have a long-term need for regular medication but do not yet have a definite diagnosis - because some conditions can take years to resolve.

12. For how long should an exemption continue?

The coalition feels it would be reasonable to ask those whose condition is not lifelong to reapply for exemption after a period, for example every five years. This is the renewal period for the current system of medical exemption certificates, including for people with cancer.

13. What is the annual prescription cost for people with long-term conditions?

We don't have an average figure for this. But we do hear from people who pay hundreds of pounds a year, particularly those who haven't previously heard of Pre-Payment Certificates.

If someone with a long term condition opts to purchase a Pre-Payment certificate, the cost of their prescriptions for 12 months will cost £104 from 1 April 2009. However many people are unaware of the option to purchase the Pre-Payment certificate, so an average of four prescriptions in 3 months at £7.20 each could cost from £115.20 upwards.

14. How much is the price of a prescription in England and has this price risen in line with inflation?

In England, prescriptions currently cost £7.20. While the increase in price in 2009 increase was lower than the current CPI rate of inflation, overall

prescription charges have increased by far more than the rate of inflation in the years since they were introduced.

15. How many people with long-term conditions are likely already to be exempt from charges due to their age or benefit entitlement?

We cannot provide an exact figure for this. However, we know there are large numbers of people with long-term conditions who are working age, and who are not claiming the right means tested benefits to qualify for prescription charge exemptions. The Government has estimated that a further five million people will be exempted from paying prescription charges as a result of their pledge to make prescriptions free for people with long-term conditions.

16. What would be the health and financial benefits of extending exemptions to cover those with long-term conditions?

Exempting people with long-term conditions from prescription charges will directly improve drug compliance and health outcomes among those who are struggling to afford medication. Both academic research and patient surveys show that a large number of people with long-term conditions do not take medication because of cost. People who struggle to afford prescription charges can adopt a number of coping strategies, including not going to see their GP (to avoid the prescription), not getting the prescription dispensed, or prioritising amongst different items. Research for Citizens Advice found that, in 2007, 800,000 people in England failed to collect a prescription because of the cost involved.

Improved health outcomes could also lower the overall cost to the NHS of caring for people with long-term conditions. Research has shown that, if people are not able to take their medications for financial reasons, they are more likely to need medical services as a result. Improved health outcomes could also lower the cost to individuals and society of the impairments resulting from long-term conditions, most notably keeping people productive, and preventing or delaying early retirement and the claiming of benefits.

17. What would be the impact of extending exemptions on (a) prescribing practice and (b) medicine usage/wastage?

a) Making prescriptions free for people with long-term conditions would reduce distorted approaches to prescribing. For example, qualitative research among GPs found that they use a wide range of strategies to try to make medicines either cheaper for patients or to increase their perceived value for money. GPs also mentioned questionable practices such as re-using returned medication and prescribing more for a family member that was exempt from prescription charges. Similarly, an audit of repeat prescribing by community pharmacies found that charge-paying patients were more likely to have longer prescribing intervals and that cost to the patient was a consideration when making these decisions.

b) Many people with long-term conditions, such as Parkinson's, are so dependent on their medication that wastage is not an issue - not taking the drugs they are prescribed is not an option. However, we agree with the National Audit Office recommendation that there should be more research into the causes of drug wastage and evaluation of existing measures to tackle wastage. The NAO estimated that the cost of drug wastage to the NHS was at least £100 million. If wastage was reduced, this could also help pay for all people with long-term conditions to be exempted from charges.

18. Are prescriptions free for people in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland and, if not, how much do they pay?

Prescriptions have been free in Wales since 2007, while Scotland and Northern Ireland are in the process of abolishing prescription charges. Prescription charges in Northern Ireland are currently £3, and will be free of charge by April 2010. Prescription charges are currently £4 and will be free of charge by April 2011.