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Patients' advocacy group opposes pharmacy coeliac testing

DENISE PIPER

Coeliac disease testing in pharmacy is not supported by the main patient-support organisation, Coeliac New Zealand.

Green Cross Health's Unichem and Life Pharmacies have started offering a test to help screen for coeliac disease, which is a permanent autoimmune disorder caused by a reaction to gluten.

The finger-prick test, Simtomax, takes 10 minutes to work and has a recommended retail price of \$62.99. Pharmacists also go through a detailed consultation with patients.

But Coeliac New Zealand does not support the point-of-care test in pharmacies, backing a "gold standard" laboratory antibody blood test ordered by a GP. If required, a small bowel biopsy can then confirm diagnosis, acting president Pip McKay says.

Patients who do decide to have the test in pharmacy should see their GP soon afterwards, regardless of whether the result is positive or negative, Ms McKay says.

Coeliac New Zealand is concerned about patients who self-diagnose or dabble with removing gluten from their diet, she says.

Patients who do have coeliac disease can "seriously compromise" their health by letting a little bit of gluten back into their diets, Ms McKay says.

"If you have coeliac disease, you

want to know for sure. Problems arise if you have the disease but then only partially exclude gluten from your diet," she says.

"It is best to know for sure and then to get the assistance and support you need to live healthily and well. This is only achieved by a total exclusion of gluten from the diet."

Screening involves consultation and triage

But the screening process in pharmacy is much more than just the finger-prick test and usually results in a referral to a GP, Green Cross Health professional services manager Alison Van Wyk says.

The process is an opportunity for the pharmacist to talk with the patient about their health and wellness, and what symptoms are concerning them, Mrs Van Wyk says.

Patients must sign a consent form and they are encouraged to agree to test results being shared with their GP, she says.

The pharmacist also explains that the screening test is not a full diagnosis, and can produce false positives and false negatives.

Referring patients to their GP is very important and is usually done whether the tests are positive or negative, Mrs Van Wyk says.

If a patient does test positive, they are referred to a doctor to get a lab test to confirm diagnosis, with a biopsy being the

"gold standard".

If this is the case, the pharmacist needs to ensure the patient does not stop eating gluten, as it could affect further test results, she says.

If a patient tests negative but they still have concerns about their symptoms, they are often referred onto a doctor as well, Mrs Van Wyk says.

The test is all about helping the thousands of New Zealanders who have coeliac disease without knowing it, she says.

"We saw a great opportunity to address awareness around a disease which, if it's left to progress, has some serious implications for health and wellness."

Simtomax test accurate for screening out coeliac disease

Green Cross Health spent eight to nine months reviewing the clinical evidence and consulting clinical experts before introducing the test to New Zealand, Mrs Van Wyk says.

The Simtomax test has a "negative predictive value" of 99.1% — which means when the test shows a negative result, the probability of the test being accurate is 99.1%.

However, the "positive predictive value" has been shown to be as low as 49% in one study. This means around half (49%) of positive results are likely to be accurate.

A Simtomax information sheet says the Simtomax test is accurate and ideal for screening out coeliac



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disease.

More testing is needed, Coeliac New Zealand says

Coeliac New Zealand estimates 60,000 to 70,000 Kiwis have coeliac disease but up to 80% of them do not know it.

The organisation is encouraging more people to be tested through their GPs.

"If you, or your child feels unwell, or tired and lacking in energy, or if there have been any changes – particularly stomach-related concerns, then you should see your GP and ask to have a simple blood test to check for coeliac disease," Ms McKay says.

"This is particularly important for those with any family history of coeliac disease or other auto-immune disorders," she says. While Coeliac New Zealand does not endorse the point-of-care tests in pharmacies, it has agreed with Green Cross Health to be a source of further information for both pharmacists and patients, Ms McKay says.

DP



Alison Van Wyk



Coeliac New Zealand is concerned coeliacs who are not properly diagnosed will re-introduce gluten into their diets