



Mr Neil O'Brien OBE MP  
Department of Health and Social Care

3 May 2023

Dear Mr O'Brien,

**RE: Reinstating the Covid-19 antivirals waiver for prescription charges**

We are writing as members of the Prescription Charges Coalition, a group of 50 charities and organisations calling for the Government to review the prescription charges exemption list in England, so people with long-term conditions can access their vital medications for free. We write to ask you to reinstate the waiver for prescription charges for Covid-19 antiviral treatments. Some members of the Coalition support people who are at higher risk from Covid-19, including people who are immunosuppressed because of their medical condition or the treatment they receive.

We feel that introducing charges for Covid-19 antiviral treatments compounds the inequality experienced by people at higher risk. And as [Government advice acknowledges](#), those with a compromised immune system remain at higher risk because the vaccine may not work for them.

The [Melody study](#) found approximately one in five immunocompromised individuals have no detectable IgG spike-protein antibodies despite three or more vaccines, but this proportion reduces with sequential booster doses. And as of [Thursday 6 April there were 7,678 Covid-19 patients in hospital](#).

We know from the people we support that many are still restricting their activities and remain highly anxious because of their ongoing risk. And also feel their ongoing risk has resulted in them becoming marginalised in society. Antiviral treatments continue to provide a vital safety net for this group. In the four weeks to [April 16 2023, 3,884](#) people have received antiviral treatments.

The knowledge that effective medicines are available has enabled many people to feel more confident about reducing some of the precautions they have been living with since March 2020. As Professor Stephen Powis, NHS England Medical Director said on the launch of Covid Medicine Delivery Units: *"Antivirals are another weapon in our arsenal to reduce hospital admissions and fatalities amongst patients at highest risk of becoming seriously ill from Covid-19 and needing hospitalisation – each and every person treated with the new drugs is testament to how the NHS is doing everything possible to protect those who are at most risk."*

We believe that the UK Government must therefore reinstate the waiver urgently to ensure there are no barriers to accessing this vital treatment to keep people at higher risk of Covid-19 well.

*"I'm 43, work and have 2 children. I've been dodging covid bullets for 3 years, living like a hermit and restricting my families activities. My only saving grace was the thought I could access treatment easily without being admitted to hospital."*

An immunocompromised individual

A [survey the Prescription Charges Coalition](#) conducted earlier this year of over 4,000 people with long-term conditions found that:

- 1 in 10 people had skipped their medication in the last year due to cost

- 9% of respondents said they weren't able to collect their prescriptions in the last 12 months due to cost.

This data is supported by Healthwatch England who have conducted a tracker poll with 2000 adults in England between October and December 2022. They found increasing numbers of people avoiding treatment because of cost.

This represents many thousands of people across England living with long-term conditions going without their vital medicine, which helps them to stay well.

The report also found that they relied on NHS services more and also had to take more time off work as a result.

Each week we hear from the people we support about the impossible decisions they're making between eating, heating and buying other essentials vital to their health and wellbeing.

It is therefore inevitable that prescription charges for people at higher risk from Covid-19 who test positive for the virus and would be eligible for treatment will be a burden.

When budgets are tightly managed, some people will just not be able to afford the unexpected cost of Covid-19 antiviral treatment. We believe that those with weakened immune systems who are at higher risk of serious illness with Covid-19, despite vaccination, should have unimpeded access to community treatments.

Therefore we urge you to urgently reinstate the Covid-19 antivirals waiver for prescription charges. For many people at higher risk, the community treatments represent a level of protection against the virus, just as the vaccine is for the general public. To achieve greater equality we firmly believe it should be provided on the same basis and have no associated prescription charge.

Members of the Coalition would be keen to meet with you to discuss this. Please let me know if you would be willing to meet by emailing [lcockram@parkinsons.org.uk](mailto:lcockram@parkinsons.org.uk) or phoning 020 7963 3915.

Best wishes,



Laura Cockram  
Chair, Prescription Charges Coalition