



PEDIATRIC PATIENT ACCESS TO MEDICAL FOODS

Pediatric patients with diseases and disorders of the gastrointestinal system and liver frequently require medical foods; yet, private insurers routinely deny coverage of medical foods. The North American Society for Pediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition (NASPGHAN) calls on Congress to require coverage of medically necessary foods for these patients.

WHAT ARE MEDICAL FOODS?

Medical foods are foods or dietary supplements that are specially formulated and processed (as opposed to a naturally occurring food used in its natural state) for a patient who requires the food as a major treatment modality. Medical foods are not foods that are part of regular diet given to patients, or foods or supplements that purport to improve health or function of otherwise healthy individuals.

MEDICAL FOODS FOR THE TREATMENT OF DISEASES OF THE DIGESTIVE SYSTEM

For many diseases of the digestive system, medical foods constitute the only route of safe and effective therapy available, or medical foods may be the preferred medical treatment, with fewer risks and side-effects than costly pharmacologic therapies.

Diseases for which medical foods are a major treatment modality include:

- chronic gastrointestinal diseases, complicated by poor absorption and malnutrition, (e.g. short bowel syndrome/intestinal failure, Crohn's disease, chronic pancreatitis);
- chronic serious liver disease (e.g. biliary atresia, genetic syndromes); and
- chronic allergic syndromes (e.g. eosinophilic esophagitis).

INSURANCE BARRIERS TO MEDICAL FOODS

Many commercial insurance carriers will not cover the cost of a medical food even when its use can lead to a desired therapeutic effect achieved at lower cost and with less risk and side-effects as pharmacologic options.

Oftentimes, insurers will cover a medical food, such as a special formula, but only if it is administered through a tube placed in the nose, stomach or intestine, even though the patient is fully capable of oral consumption. Administration of medical foods by tube should only be used in situations where the child is unable to consume sufficient quantities of needed foods orally. Feeding through devices can be associated with its own potential complications and can be cumbersome to the family and the patient. For example, a gastrostomy tube can leak, cause ulcerations, or in severe cases, cause a perforation in the intestinal tract.

WHY FEDERAL LEGISLATION IS NEEDED REQUIRING COVERAGE OF MEDICAL FOODS FOR DISEASES AND DISORDERS OF THE GASTROINTESTINAL SYSTEM AND LIVER

For many insured children, medical foods are an essential component of their medical treatment; however, because they are not a covered benefit, patients and their families incur the tremendous cost of medical foods or forgo their physician's recommended treatment, which, can lead to poor medical outcomes. No federal law exists to mandate consistent coverage and payment for medical foods. State laws, where they exist, are variable and do not apply to plans governed by the Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA).