



**Minister Says Comprehensive Report on Cost of Healthy Eating
& Specialised Diets is Welcome Step in Modernising Welfare
Diet Payments**

***Report Finds That Weekly Food Costs in Some Cases Almost
60% More in Convenience Stores Than in Large Low-cost
Stores***

The Minister for Social Affairs, Séamus Brennan TD, today welcomed a comprehensive report from the Irish Nutrition and Dietetic Institute (INDI) on the cost of healthy eating and specialised diets in Ireland which he said had brought an up to date focus on the varying costs of healthy foods and, also, contained modernisation proposals based on the latest dietary and medical views and the increased availability of many of the ingredients required for special diets.

The report, by Dr. Muireann Cullen of INDI, is the most comprehensive review of specialised diets and food costs that has been carried out in Ireland in the past decade. The study examines how the cost of the special diets-and the requirements for a healthy food diet in general varies considerably depending on where a person shops and finds that weekly food costs in some cases are almost 60% more on average in convenience stores than in the large low-cost stores.

Diet supplement payments are currently provided through the supplementary welfare allowance scheme, which is administered by the Community Welfare division of the Health Service Executive on behalf of the Department of Social and Family Affairs. Diet supplements are paid to people who have been prescribed a special diet but cannot afford that diet within their normal weekly income. The test of affordability is whether the cost of the special diet is more than one third of their income. When it is, a diet supplement is paid to make up the difference between one third of income and the cost of the prescribed diet.

There are approximately 11,750 people currently receiving diet supplements at an annual cost of over €6m.



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Overall, the study shows that convenience stores are the most expensive places to buy food, while the large low-cost stores offer the best prices for food. It also shows that a person on the lowest social welfare income could meet the full cost of the most expensive prescribed special diet for less than one third of their income if they shopped at one of the large low-cost stores.

Minister Brennan said that he recognised that not everybody is in a position to do their shopping at the cheapest shops and for this reason he intended to base the new diet supplement scheme at the highest pricing structure-food costs at convenience stores- in order to protect the position of those who cannot shop around because of location, age, health or for other reasons.

The extensive study, commissioned by the Department of Social and Family Affairs, concludes that:

- The cost of the sample diets varies considerably depending on where a person shops: weekly food costs can be up to 57% more on average in convenience stores than in the large low-cost stores;
- A person on the lowest social welfare income could meet the full cost of the most expensive prescribed special diet for less than one third of their weekly income if they shopped at one of the large low-cost stores;
- Compared with the estimated costs of a normal healthy eating diet, the typical actual additional cost of a special diet is between €3 and €8 per week, depending on the type of diet concerned and on the type of shop or supermarket in which people normally buy their groceries;
- There are a number of diets which currently attract a diet supplement but which do not result in extra costs to the individual over and above the cost of a normal, healthy eating diet;
- Some existing diets are no longer relevant, in the light of the latest dietary and medical views, while other conditions warrant special diets at some higher cost.



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The study recommends, following its detailed research, a new framework for categorising the various diets in which all of the prescribed diets would fall into one of four categories:

- Gluten Free Diet
- Low Lactose Milk Free Diet
- High Protein High Calorie Diet
- Liquidised Altered Consistency Diet.

In undertaking the work, the INDI designed an example of a nutritionally balanced, healthy eating diet covering a seven-day period and also examples of the various specialised diets. They then carried out a survey to find out the cost of those diets at a range of shop types, including convenience stores, supermarkets and large low-cost stores.

Minister Brennan said this research work had provided a solid up-to-date basis for calculating the level of diet supplement payment needed to achieve his determined view that nobody should have to spend more than one third of their income on their prescribed diet.

Minister Brennan added: "This study is the first update of the needs of those on specialised diets undertaken since 1996. It modernises the requirements in this special area by taking account of emerging trends in this whole area and also looks at the advantages and opportunities of competitive consumer targeted pricing structures. I have asked my officials to closely examine the findings of this study so as to ensure that nobody who requires special dietary needs is left without the type of fully adequate supports that my Department provides. Once I am satisfied of this I intend to introduce a revised supplement system shortly to take account of the study findings and recommendations. The study shows that convenience stores are the most expensive places to buy food while the large low-cost stores offer the best prices for food. It also shows that a person on the lowest social welfare income could meet the full cost of the most expensive prescribed special diet for less than one third of their income if they shopped at one of the large low-cost stores.



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Minister Brennan said he recognised that not everybody is in a position to do their shopping at the cheapest shops. "For that reason, I intend to base the new diet supplement scheme on the food costs at convenience stores in order to protect the position of those who cannot shop around because of location, age or for whatever reason. In addition to improving the diet supplement scheme, I also want to ensure that other social welfare recipients can afford a healthy-eating diet. The record increases in weekly social welfare payment rates I introduced earlier this month help achieve that. They provide a substantial real increase after fully compensating for inflation and as a result, a healthy-eating diet is now more affordable than before".

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