

Imported medicines used to treat rare diseases now exempt from basic customs duty

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In news—The Central Government has given full exemption from basic customs duty on all drugs and Food for Special Medical Purposes imported for personal use for treatment of all Rare Diseases listed under the National Policy for Rare Diseases 2021.

Key updates-

- In order to avail this exemption, the individual importer has to produce a certificate from Central or State Director Health Services or District Medical Officer/Civil Surgeon of the district.
- Drugs/Medicines generally attract basic customs duty of 10%, while some categories of life saving drugs/vaccines attract concessional rate of 5% or Nil.
- While exemptions have already been provided to specified drugs for treatment of Spinal Muscular Atrophy or Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy, the Government has been receiving many representations seeking customs duty relief for drugs and medicines used in treatment of other Rare Diseases.
- Drugs or Special Foods required for the treatment of these diseases are expensive and need to be imported.
- It is estimated that for a child weighing 10 kg, the annual cost of treatment for some rare diseases, may vary from ₹10 lakh to more than ₹1 crore per year with treatment being lifelong and drug dose and cost, increasing with age and weight.

- This exemption will result in substantial cost savings and provide much needed relief to the patients.
- The **Government has also fully exempted Pembrolizumab (Keytruda)** used in treatment of various cancers from basic customs duty.

Spinal muscular atrophy (SMA)-

- Spinal muscular atrophy is a genetic disorder characterized by weakness and wasting (atrophy) in muscles used for movement (skeletal muscles). It is caused by a loss of specialized nerve cells, called motor neurons that control muscle movement. The weakness tends to be more severe in the muscles that are close to the center of the body (proximal) compared to muscles away from the body's center (distal).
- The muscle weakness usually worsens with age. There are many types of spinal muscular atrophy that are caused by changes in the same genes. The types differ in age of onset and severity of muscle weakness; however, there is overlap between the types

Pembrolizumab-

- Pembrolizumab, sold under the brand name Keytruda, is a humanized antibody used in cancer immunotherapy that treats melanoma, lung cancer, head and neck cancer, Hodgkin lymphoma, stomach cancer, cervical cancer, and certain types of breast cancer.
- It is given by slow injection into a vein.