

Making medicine labels easier to read

Medicine labels contain critical information, such as the drug name, dosage instructions and storage information. Make a mistake reading the label and it could have poor consequences for you (if it is your medicine) or for your patients (if you a healthcare practitioner). How can medicine labels be constructed so that they are easier to read?



Increase the font size

The US Food & Drug Administration (FDA) recommends that the text on over-the-counter (OTC) drug packaging should be at least 6-point (x-height of 1mm, the body height of a lowercase letter)¹.

Xu and co-authors² measured the font size on a range of products, including 87 OTC drugs, and found that approximately 10% of the products had font sizes smaller than 1mm high.

The authors demonstrated that people aged in their late 30s/early 40s who are starting to lose their ability to accommodate (focus) at a close distance (called “presbyopia”) will be disadvantaged by small size font if they do not have reading spectacles: if they bring the label closer to their eyes it will not be in focus, but if they hold the label further away (so it is in focus) then it will be too small to read².

People with vision loss from eye diseases such as macular degeneration may also be disadvantaged by small size font on medicine packaging.

Xu and co-authors recommend that the font size on product labels should be larger than 1mm so that the text is easier to read by people older than 40 years².

Can you read this?

This is 6 point font. When printed on A4 paper the x-height of letters is approximately 1mm high.

Enhance the text

Another way to make font easier to read is to enhance it's appearance, for example, by using:

bold font

TALLMAN TEXT

inverted text

In a study with nurses and nursing students, Liu and co-authors³ found that drug names with a similar appearance were more easily differentiated when the differing part of the drug name was tallman PLUS boldface or when the text was inverted:

novo**LIN** / novo**LOG**

novo **lin** / novo **log**

However, subjects had more difficulty recalling drug names that were tallman PLUS boldface. The authors speculate that the shape of the drug name is different when it is tallman PLUS boldface compared to when it is lowercase, and this may disrupt the memory coding process³.

References: 1. US FDA (2008) <https://www.fda.gov/media/76481/download> 2. Optometry and Vision Science (2019) 96(4): 291-300. 3. Ergonomics (2019) published ahead-of-print <http://DOI.org/10.1080/00140139.2019.1629637>

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