



Prescription Medication Labelling

Background

Revised August 2025

Prescription medication labels play a crucial role in conveying essential information about a medication to ensure its safe and proper use. A patient's ability to safely identify, select, and administer a medication is dependent on the user being able to read and understand the label's information. The legibility and, therefore, patient comprehension of a prescription medication label can be influenced by typographic elements of the label, such as size, spacing, and use of bold or italic fonts, among other factors.¹

Policy Issue

The legibility of medication labelling is a concern for Canadians. Labels must be easy to read to help avoid medication errors. The inability to read or understand prescription medication labelling attributed to problematic prescription drug labelling is one of the most common reasons for medication use errors, patient misunderstanding, and drug non-adherence.^{2,3}

Visual impairment is growing in Canada. Based on data from the 2022 Canadian Survey on Disability (CSD), the prevalence of visual difficulties that impact daily activities has increased in the Canadian population, with 7.4% of the population experiencing visual difficulties.⁴ In 2023, an estimated 5.2 million Canadians reported having difficulty with print material, and of those, 77.4% reported specifically having difficulty seeing words in print.⁵ Older adults are more likely to be affected, as they have higher rates of medication use, and visual problems become more frequent with age.⁶

Policy Position

The CAO supports the use of Health Canada's Good Label and Package Practices Guide for Prescription Drugs by all stakeholders involved in developing and producing medication labels and packaging.

Based on the Guide¹, the CAO encourages the use of:

- sans serif type style with adequate spacing between letters and words for key information,
- both uppercase and lowercase lettering, avoiding all capital letters except for brand names, headings, and warnings that are brief,
- the largest type size possible, with key information in no less than point size 6,
- a background colour that is significantly different from the type colour for smaller type sizes,
- flush left, ragged right alignment of multiple lines of text,
- TALLman lettering on labels as a risk mitigation strategy, consistent with the ISMP Canada list of TALLman Lettering for Look-Alike/Sound-Alike Drug Names in Canada⁷,
- dark colour text on pale backgrounds to ensure sufficient contrast for optimum visibility,
- large print labels wherever possible. If this is not possible, a larger font “duplicate label” printed on paper stock should be provided,
- consistent layout of information by all labelling companies.

The CAO urges Health Canada to further protect the health and safety of Canadians by putting these recommendations into regulation. Current regulations for the labelling of drug products are outlined in the Food and Drugs Act and the Food and Drug Regulations.

The CAO supports measures that make the information contained on medication labels more legible and accessible. The practices outlined in Health Canada’s Good Label and Package Practices Guide for Prescription Drugs should be followed as a positive step toward safer prescription medication labelling.

References

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