

LAY SUMMARY OF A RESEARCH STUDY CONDUCTED IN THE SCHOOL

Preferences of the general public for instructions on medicine labels

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Why we did this study

When a medicine is dispensed in the UK, the pharmacist always attaches a computer-generated label to it. There are standards that pharmacists must comply with about what the label includes and how it is laid out. There is also some guidance about how directions for using the medicine are written, but no-one has actually asked people what sort of wording they prefer to have on these medicine labels.

Medicine labels **must** include:

- The name of the patient
- The name and strength of the medicine
- The date it was dispensed
- The name and address of the supplying pharmacy
- The words “Keep out of the reach of children”
- Directions for use
- Any precautions or special instructions when using the medicine (like WITH OR AFTER FOOD)

What we wanted to find out

We wanted to find out how the general public prefer the wording of directions for use on medicines labels. We also wanted to find out if they needed labels in other languages and if they would like to have the reason for the medicine written on the label or not.

What we did

We ran a focus group to find out what people thought then used what they said to develop a questionnaire. The Public Involvement in Pharmacy Studies group helped us design this questionnaire. It included questions to find out about peoples’ preferences for different ways of writing directions. These involved:

- Words (ONE) **or** figures (1)
- Specific periods of day (MORNING and EVENING) **or** more general (TWICE a day)
- Specific times of day (6pm) **or** period of the day (EVENING)
- AS DIRECTED *or* specific directions
- Adding the reason for use to the label (yes **or** no)
- Need for different language (yes **or** no)

Who we asked

We invited adults aged 18 years or over to complete the questionnaire. They did not have to be taking a regular prescription medicine. We used two different methods of recruitment, surveys on the street and on-line surveys posted on patient support groups and charities.

519 people completed the questionnaire, but only 485 of these gave details about themselves. More women than men completed it – 308 (59%). 209 people were aged 18 to 35, 163 were aged 31 to 50, and 113 were aged over 50 years. The majority were of Asian background (63%).

60% of respondents used one or more regular medicines. For 32%, English was not their first language.

What we found out

- Around 77% preferred words (ONE) over figures (1)
- Around 80% preferred specific periods of day (MORNING and EVENING) over more general directions (TWICE a day)
- Fewer (36%) preferred specific times of day (6pm) over the period of the day (EVENING)
- 53% said 'yes' they would like the reason for the medicine on the label, but 19% said 'no' and 28% didn't mind.
- 53% said 'no' they did not like AS DIRECTED on the label, only 21% said they did and 26% didn't mind.
- 8% (35) said they needed medicines labels in another language, mostly Gujarati

Some people gave reasons for their preferences:

"Numbers are better than words for people who struggle to read English."

"Putting the reason for the medicine on the label could cause embarrassment if people don't want others to know what it's for."

"Some people may worry if they can't take a medicine at the exact time on the label."

What this means

- Guidance on writing instructions for labels on medicines advises using WORDS not numbers. The public agree with this.
- There is no guidance on whether to use general or specific instructions for the times when medicines should be used. The public prefer periods of the day rather than specific times or more general instructions such as TWICE a day. Many people don't like a label which just says USE AS DIRECTED.
- Over half would like the reason for use to be on the medicine label, which is not widespread practice.
- Even though for many people English is a second language, a minority require their medicine label in another language. At the moment most pharmacies in the UK do not and cannot offer this.

How you can use this research

If you or someone you care for needs clearer instructions on a medicine label, you can ask the pharmacist if they can produce the label how you need it. It is important that you understand what the instructions for using the medicine mean. If you are at all unsure what the instructions for using any medicine mean, always ask your pharmacist or your doctor.