



ESL Podcast 403 – Understanding Drug Labels

GLOSSARY

medication – medicine; a liquid or pill that one swallows to treat a disease or illness and/or to begin to feel better

* The doctor asked whether we were taking any medications for high blood pressure.

pharmacy – a store that sells medicine and other things

* I need to go to the pharmacy to buy some more aspirin for my headache.

label – a small piece of paper that is put on a bottle with writing, stating the name of the product, what is in it, and how it should be used

* According to the label, this bottle of wine is from Napa Valley, California.

active ingredients – the things that are put in a medication and can affect one's health

* These pills are purple, but the purple coloring isn't listed in the active ingredients since it isn't really part of the medicine.

warning – a statement describing a danger that might happen; a statement letting one know of a risk

* Cigarette packages have warnings stating that smoking is bad for your health.

to watch out for (something) – to look for something that might happen; to be aware that something dangerous or bad might happen

* Watch out for cars before you cross the street!

allergic reaction – something bad that one's body does when it is exposed to a certain type of chemical, food, or other things

* If Mitch eats lobster, he has a strong allergic reaction where his skin turns red and it becomes difficult for him to breathe.

seal – a small piece of plastic or thin metal that is glued to a bottle so that what is inside cannot get out, and must be taken off before one can use what is in the bottle

* The ketchup wouldn't come out of the bottle, because Hung forgot to take off the seal.

cap – a plastic lid on a bottle, usually that must be turned to come off

* It's very difficult to get the cap off of this bottle of vitamins.



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to be on the safe side – a phrase used to show that one is doing something for prevention, or to make sure that something bad doesn't happen, even though it might not be necessary

* Janet always checks three times that her doors are locked at night, just to be on the safe side.

dosage – how much medicine one should take, and how often; the amount and frequency with which a medicine should be taken

* The dosage for this medicine is one teaspoon every three hours.

to exceed – to take or do more of something than the limit or that is generally believed to be a good or safe amount

* Randall was driving 80 miles per hour and got a ticket for exceeding the maximum speed limit of 65 miles per hour.

prescription – a medicine that can be bought only with a doctor's written permission

* Why do you take prescription vitamins? Can't you just take the regular ones?

drowsiness – sleepiness; the feeling of being very tired

* Gretel was obviously very tired, and seeing her drowsiness made me tired too.

dizziness – the feeling that the room is moving, maybe in circles, when actually nothing is moving; the feeling that one might fall down for no reason

* Cailee started complaining about dizziness, so we asked her to sit down and gave her a glass of water.

to impair – to make something worse; to make something not work as well as it normally does

* Her vision is impaired, so she has to wear thick glasses.

childproof – a container that is designed for safety and is difficult or impossible for children to open

* Some childproof containers are so difficult to open that even adults can't open them.



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COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. Where can one usually find dosage information for a medication?
 - a) On the label.
 - b) On the seal.
 - c) On the cap.

2. What is one of the medicine's warnings?
 - a) That one might not be able to drive ever again.
 - b) That one might not be able to drive very well.
 - c) That one will be able to drive better than ever.

WHAT ELSE DOES IT MEAN?

seal

The word “seal,” in this podcast, means a small piece of plastic or thin metal that is glued to a bottle so that something cannot get in or out, and must be taken off before one can use what is in the bottle: “If the seal is broken on the bottle of milk, it means that someone has already opened it.” A “seal” can also be a special mark that officially represents a person or organization, or especially the government: “The state seal is at the top of all the governor’s letters.” Finally, a “seal” is a large animal that lives near and swims in the ocean, makes loud noises, and eats fish: “Many tourists like to see the seals on the Oregon Coast.”

cap

In this podcast, the word “cap” means a plastic lid on a bottle, usually that must be turned to come off: “Where did you put the cap for this water bottle?” A “cap” can also be the upper limit or maximum amount of something: “The people voted to have a \$4 million cap on spending for the new library.” Or, “The number of people who can safely be put into this room is capped at 230.” A “cap” is also a “baseball cap,” or an informal hat that has a large piece that goes over one’s forehead to keep the sun out of one’s eyes: “Be sure to take off your cap before you go into the church.” Finally, the phrase “to put (one’s) thinking cap on” means to think about something a lot or to try to find a solution to a problem: “Put your thinking cap on and find a way to fix this problem!”



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CULTURE NOTE

In the United States, prescription medications and “over-the-counter drugs” (medicines that can be bought without a doctor’s permission) have labels that are intended to be read before the medicines are taken. The labels for all over-the-counter drugs must list the same seven things.

First, the label must list the active ingredients, or the chemicals that actually do something to improve one’s health or make one feel better.

Second, the label must list the uses for the medicine. These are the “symptoms” (or the things that are wrong with someone) or diseases that can be helped with the medicine.

Third, the label must list warnings, or statements about what bad things might happen when one takes the medicine. “Common” warnings (or warnings that one sees on many labels) include warnings for pregnant women and warnings that it is important to keep the medicine away from children.

Fourth, the label must have a list of “inactive ingredients.” These are the things that are in the medicine but do not have an effect on one’s health. These could be the things that make the medicine have a different taste or color.

Fifth, the label should describe the medicine’s “purpose” (or what it should do), like stopping a runny nose or making one cough less.

Sixth, the label must include “directions,” or instructions for how much to take, and how often.

Seventh, the label can include other information, like how people should “store” (keep in their home when they are not using) the medicine.

In addition, the label has to let people know the “expiration date” (the date after which something should not be used), how much medicine is in the bottle, the name of the company that made the medicine, and what to do if one takes too much of the medicine.

Comprehension Questions Correct Answers: 1 – a; 2 – b



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COMPLETE TRANSCRIPT

Welcome to English as a Second Language Podcast number 403: Understanding Drug Labels.

This is English as a Second Language Podcast number 403. I'm your host, Dr. Jeff McQuillan, coming to you from the Center for Educational Development in beautiful Los Angeles, California.

Visit our website at eslpod.com. Download a Learning Guide for this episode that contains all of the vocabulary, definitions, sample sentences, additional definitions, cultural notes, comprehension questions, and a complete transcript of everything we say on this episode.

This episode is called "Understanding Drug Labels." It's a dialogue between Bernie and Gloria about some typical vocabulary that you will find if you are looking at medication; that is, drugs. This can be very important, especially if you are in an English-speaking country and need to take some drugs that you buy, so let's get started.

[start of dialogue]

Bernie: Oh, I'm in so much pain! Where is the medication we got from the pharmacy?

Gloria: It's right here, but we need to read the label first. Okay, these are the active ingredients and they seem okay. This warning says that we need to watch out for any allergic reactions. It also says to ask your doctor before using it if you have heart problems.

Bernie: I don't. Can you just give me the medication?

Gloria: I'm checking to make sure the seal under the cap isn't broken, just to be on the safe side. I also need to read the dosage information so you'll know how much to take. It says, "Adults (12 years or older): Two tablets every four hours; do not exceed 12 tablets in 24 hours."

Bernie: That's fine. That's fine. Where is the prescription medication from my doctor?

Gloria: Here it is. This one has several warnings. It says that it may cause drowsiness or dizziness. It also says, "This drug may impair your ability to drive."



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Bernie: I don't plan to drive today or any day soon. Now will you please give me my medication?

Gloria: I will as soon as I get this childproof cap off.

Bernie: I may be dead by then!

[end of dialogue]

We're talking, in this episode, about drug labels. A "label" is a small piece of paper, usually that is put on the medicine bottle – the container where the medicine is kept. The label has writing on it that gives you the name of the product, in this case, the drug. You can also have labels on cans, things that have food inside of them, and so forth. "Label" is a general term for a little piece of paper that tells you what is inside something.

Bernie begins by saying, "Oh, I'm in so much pain (I'm in a lot of pain)! Where is the medication we got from the pharmacy?" he asks. "Medication" is just another word for medicine or drugs. It's a liquid or a pill that you would, perhaps, "swallow," or put into your body to make you feel better. A "pharmacy" is a store that sells medicine and other drugs; we sometimes call it a "drugstore." The two terms, "pharmacy" and "drugstore" in the U.S. are used "interchangeably," meaning you can use one for the other; it doesn't matter. Some people call a pharmacy only that part of the store, or only a store that sells drugs that you need a prescription for. A "prescription" is basically permission from a doctor that says you can take this drug.

Gloria says, "It's right here, but we need to read the label first. Okay," she says, "these are the active ingredients and they seem okay." The "active ingredients" are the things that you put into a drug that actually makes you healthier – that makes you better. Drugs sometimes have other ingredients that are used, but the active ingredients are the most important ones. An "ingredient" is what you use to make something else, usually something you eat. So, you can talk about the ingredients of a salad, which would be lettuce, tomatoes, etc.

Gloria says, "This warning says that we need to watch out for any allergic reactions." A "warning" is a statement describing some danger, something bad that might happen. It's letting you know that there might be a problem and yet you need to be careful. To "watch out for" something means to make sure something doesn't happen, usually something dangerous to make that it sure doesn't happen, or to be looking for this bad thing. For example, "Watch out for



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the cars on the street,” you might say to a child crossing the street. “Watch out for” means look for something, in this case, something that could be dangerous.

The “allergic reactions” are things that the body does when it is exposed to certain kinds of chemicals or other things; it’s a bad thing that happens to the body. Some people have allergic reactions to, for example, the drug penicillin. Their body doesn’t like the drug, and so they will have this reaction. Maybe their skin will turn red or they’ll have difficulty breathing; these are allergic reactions. “Allergic” comes from the word “allergy” (allergy), which are things that bother you, often causing you to sneeze or to have difficulty breathing, for example.

The dialogue continues by Gloria saying the label “also says to ask your doctor before using it if you have heart problems.” Some medicines you can’t use because you have other medical conditions, so this would be an example of that. Bernie says, “I don’t (I don’t have any heart problems). Can you just give me the medication?” Bernie, remember, is feeling pain so he wants the drug right away. Gloria, however, says, “I’m checking to make sure the seal under the cap isn’t broken, just to be on the safe side.” In medicine sold in the United States, there’s almost always a “seal” on the top of the bottle. This is a small piece of plastic that is put on the bottle so that nothing can be put in or nothing can be taken out. This is for safety reasons, so no one tries to hurt you by putting something in your medication that you don’t know about that is bad for you. This, unfortunately, has happened in the past. The “cap” is the top of the bottle. It’s also sometimes called a “lid,” depending on how it’s put on the bottle. But, a cap is usually something that you turn to take off, and then you can get inside of the bottle. Both “seal” and “cap” have a couple of different meanings in English; take a look at our Learning Guide for some additional explanations.

So, Gloria says she’s checking the seal under the cap to make sure it isn’t broken, meaning that someone hasn’t taken the seal off, that someone hasn’t put something bad into the bottle. She says she wants “to be on the safe side.” The expression “to be on the safe side” means that you are trying to make sure something bad doesn’t happen. Even though it might not be necessary to do this, you want to be safe; you want to be extra cautious – extra safe.

Gloria says, “I also need to read the dosage information so you’ll know how much to take.” The “dosage” (dosage) is how much medicine you should take, and how often. It may be one pill in the morning and one pill in the afternoon; that would be the “dosage.” The dosage says: “Adults (12 or older): Two tablets (two pills) every four hours; do not exceed 12 tablets in 24 hours.” To “exceed” (exceed) means to do or to take more of something than you should. So, if it



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says “do not exceed 12 tablets in 24 hours,” that means that you should not take more than 12 pills in one day.

Bernie says, “That’s fine. That’s fine. Where is the prescription medication from my doctor?” A “prescription,” we already know, is special medicine the doctor gives you that you need the doctor’s permission for in order to buy. Gloria says, “Here it is.” She says, “This one has several warnings. It says that it may cause drowsiness or dizziness.” Sometimes certain pills – certain medications cause you to be “drowsy” (drowsy). That’s just another word for “sleepy,” feeling very tired. “Dizziness” is a feeling that everything in the room is moving around you, usually in circles, when, in fact, nothing is moving. Dizziness can cause you to fall down.

So, some drugs may cause dizziness, and you have to be careful. Gloria says that the label on this bottle says, “This drug may impair your ability to drive.” To “impair” (impair) means to make something worse, or to make something not work as well as it normally does. If you say, “Her vision is impaired,” we mean she doesn’t see as well as she should. So, the “drug may impair your ability to drive,” it may make you unable to drive as well as you should.

Bernie says, “I don’t plan to drive today or any day soon. Now will you please give me my medication?” Gloria says, “I will (I will give it to you) as soon as I get this childproof cap off.” Something that is “childproof” (one word) is a container that is designed to be difficult for a young child to open. This is especially important for drugs. We don’t want young children going into your room and opening up a pill bottle and hurting themselves by taking this drug, so most drugs have a childproof top. The joke is that the childproof top is often very difficult even for an adult to get off, and so some people complain about that.

Gloria is having difficulty getting the childproof cap off. Bernie says, “I may be dead by then!” meaning by the time you have the cap off it will be too late, I’ll be dead, because, of course, Bernie has been waiting all this time to get the pain medication.

Now let’s listen to the dialogue, this time at a normal speed.

[start of dialogue]

Bernie: Oh, I’m in so much pain! Where is the medication we got from the pharmacy?



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Bernie: I don't plan to drive today or any day soon. Now will you please give me my medication?

Gloria: I will as soon as I get this childproof cap off.

Bernie: I may be dead by then!

[end of dialogue]

We hope our script today did not make you drowsy or dizzy! It was written by Dr. Lucy Tse, who always reads the labels first.

From Los Angeles, California, I'm Jeff McQuillan. Thanks for listening. We'll see you next time on ESL Podcast.

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