

GOAL: Read Medicine Labels

Contributed by Holly Fulghum-Nutters,
South San Francisco Library



Introduction

All of us at one time or another must take medicine. Some of that medicine might be prescribed by a doctor, other medicines we buy "over-the-counter," like aspirin, without a prescription. In either case, we must examine the label of the medicine to understand when to take it, how to take it, and how much to take. Sometimes the label will even explain why we should take it; it might list symptoms – "for headaches and nausea" – for example. If we have children it is very important to pay attention to the dosage and any safety issues. It's also very important to keep all medicine out of the reach of children.

Getting Started

Start by discussing the following questions:

- What do you already know about medicine labels?
- How have you read medicine labels in the past?
- What part of the medicine label is hard and what part is easy?

Books & Materials

After answering the questions above, narrow the focus. For instance, you may want to just work on prescription medicines with a concentration on dosage instructions.

- Bring in your bottle of prescription medicine, especially if that particular medicine is the reason for this goal.
- Bring in empty bottles of over-the-counter medicines or print off some medicine labels from the computer lab. Do an online search to find a label for an over-the counter medicine (like aspirin) and for a prescription drug.
- Have a dictionary available to use. It's a core text for all learning pairs.
- Use an online dictionary because it has a speech component on it and will pronounce the words.

Key Vocabulary

Before looking at the medicine label, generate a list of words that might be included in the dosage instructions for taking medicine. Here are some words that might be on the list:

- ◆ dose/dosage
- ◆ overdose
- ◆ tablet
- ◆ capsule
- ◆ drowsy
- ◆ symptoms
- ◆ warning

Reading Practice

Study the Label.

- Look at the label. Concentrate on the dosage instructions. Take turns reading them out loud while the other person follows along silently. Next read them together (duet reading). Finally, read them by yourself. If you stumble over a word, your tutor should supply it.
- Compare the list of words that were generated earlier with what is on the label. Together write down any new words.
- Copy all of the words on flash cards and practice saying each of the words in a sentence. Together write the sentences on the back of the flash cards.
- Separate out words that might be difficult if you were reading them by yourself. Together divide each of these harder words into syllables and practice reading them out loud.
- Read the name of the medicine. Break it into syllables. Write the word on a flash card. Pay special attention to the pronunciation of the word. Practice saying the word out loud.
- Pretend you are ordering the medicine from the pharmacy. Create a dialog and after practicing it, together write it down.
- Read the dosage instructions one more time. Write down words that you are still having trouble with for future use.

Common Label Warnings.

IF THE LABEL SAYS:	IT'S BECAUSE:
Take with a full glass of water	Water helps dilute drugs so they won't irritate the esophagus or stomach lining, plus it helps flush them into the body so they break down properly.
Stay out of the sun	The drug increases the skin's sensitivity to sunburn. If you usually burn in 20 minutes, it may take only 10 while on the drug.
Avoid dairy	Calcium can delay drug absorption. You won't get the right dose.
Take with food	Food boosts absorption and helps reduce nausea.
Avoid driving or operating heavy machinery	The drug makes you drowsy, dizzy or lightheaded; slows reaction time and motor skills.

From [Reader's Digest - February 2007](#)

Writing Practice

- Create a fill-in-the-blank exercise by looking at the instructions on the prescription bottle and taking out some of the words that you have worked on together. Put those words at the bottom of the paper. Fill in the blanks.
- After you complete the fill-in-the-blank exercise, re-read the instructions by yourself. Does it all make sense?
- Do some roleplay: pretend you are the doctor and tell your “patient” how much medicine to take. The “patient” should write the prescription down. Trade roles.

Games & Activities

- **Play Scrabble.** Use the tiles to spell out some of the words that were on the flash cards.

Independent Practice

At home, look in your medicine cabinet to find other medicines. Make a list of the words on the new medicines and compare them with the words that you have worked on in the tutoring session.

Milestones

- *Initial Effort* – You can read all of the words on the flash cards.
- *Making Progress* – You can read the dosage instructions from the prescription medicine.
- *Accomplished* – You can read the instructions on your prescription medicine as well as at least two over-the-counter medications.

Contributor’s Biography

Holly Fulghum-Nutters. Holly has worked at Project Read of the South San Francisco Library for 16 years and for the last nine years as Program Manager. She has an MA in English and has taught English as a Second Language and Adult Basic Education classes. She also has a secondary credential. Holly oversees all parts of Project Read.