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Proposed Changes to Prescription Drug Labels Designed to Reduce Medication Mix-ups

The scientific nonprofit group that sets standards for medicine safety is proposing reworking and standardizing medication labels, in an effort to reduce potentially dangerous medication mix-ups.

The U.S. Pharmacopeial Convention (USP), is proposing to keep the drug name, clear patient instructions and dose prominently displayed in clear, large type at the top of the label, while placing less important information, such as the pharmacy name and drug quantity, away from dosing instructions.

The changes would do away with confusing instructions.

Instead of "Take two tablets twice daily," the instructions would read, "Take two tablets in the morning and two tablets in the evening." Labels would not have vague instructions such as "take as directed." They would use simpler language—for instance, using the term "high blood pressure" instead of "hypertension," according to HealthDay.

Currently, prescription drug labels can differ widely among pharmacies. The new labels would standardize medication information on the labels.

"Lack of universal standards for labeling on dispensed prescription containers is a root cause for patient misunderstanding, non-adherence and medication errors," Joanne G. Schwartzberg, M.D., a member of the USP Nomenclature, Safety and Labeling Expert Committee, the group of independent experts responsible for the new standard, said in a news release.

"With an aging and increasingly diverse population, and people utilizing a growing number of medications, the risks are more pronounced today than ever. These USP standards will promote patient understanding of their medication instructions, which is absolutely essential to preventing potentially dangerous mistakes and helping to ensure patient health and safety."

According to the USP, studies have found that 46 percent of patients misunderstood one or more dosage instructions on prescription labels. Patients with poor reading skills are 34 times more likely to misunderstand label directions.

Prescription drugs are the third most commonly abused category of drugs, behind alcohol and marijuana and ahead of cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine. To learn more, click here.