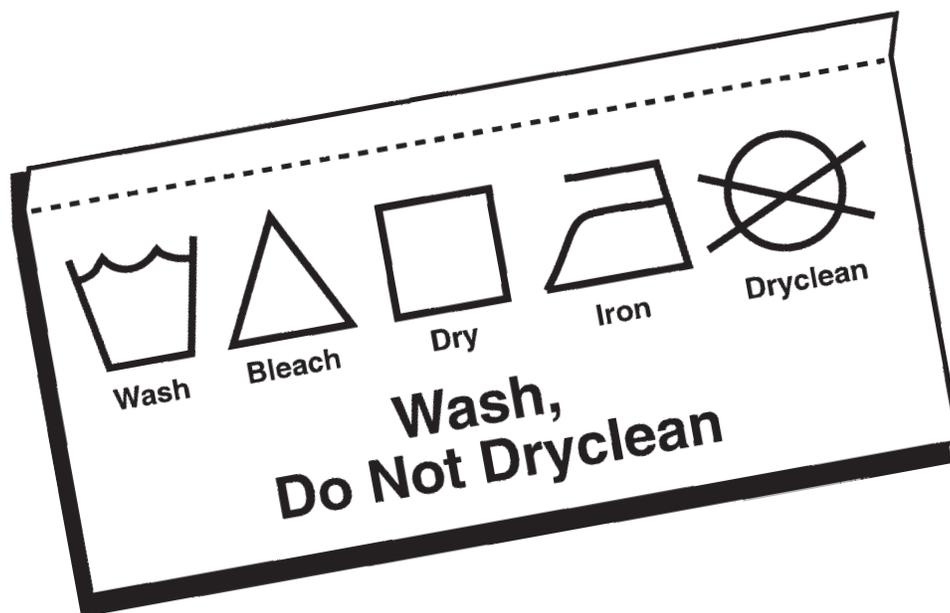


Understanding Care Labels

What Everyone Needs to Know

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Today's clothing comes with a much needed item, the care label. This label contains information regarding how to take care of the garment. For many consumers, the information on the care label is vitally important. So important, that the care label influences the purchase decision of four out of five consumers.

Care labels act on the behalf of the consumer. While valuable, they are not without their problems. They may be difficult to decipher and understand. Sometimes information is incomplete and inaccurate. The large number of imported garments results in a variety of care symbols, and currently there is no universal set of symbols to indicate proper care.

Perhaps most frustrating to the consumer is that care labels indicate only one safe method of care.

Other safe options for care may exist, but are not always stated on the care label.

Despite their problems, care labels are important in establishing responsibility if garments are damaged in the care process. Knowing the requirements and responsibilities of care labels will help you take proper care of items.

What is the Care Labeling Rule?

The Care Labeling Rule was issued by the Federal Trade Commission in 1971 to assist consumers in obtaining information about the care of clothing items. It was revised in 1984. It applies to all manufacturers and importers of textile wearing apparel and piece goods.

The rule basically states that one accurate, reliable care method must be provided on a permanent, legible care label that is attached to the garment. The rule requires manufacturers to have a reasonable basis for the instructions given on the care label. This standard is established through tests, current technical literature, past experience and industry expertise.

What must be labeled?

All textile wearing apparel used to cover or protect the body.

Exemptions:

- Footwear, gloves and hats, or other articles used exclusively to cover or protect the head.
- Neckties, belts and other apparel items not used to cover or protect parts of the body.

- Leather and suede are exempt, as well as household articles.
- Garments sold to institutional buyers for commercial use.
- Articles that are completely washable and retail for \$3 or less.
- Disposable garments.

All piece goods sold for making home-sewn apparel (provided on bolt end or fabric selvage).

Exemptions:

- Piece good remnants up to 10 yards, when the fiber content is not known.
- Trim up to 5 inches wide, which is sold for home-sewn apparel.

What does not require a label?

A few items do not require a permanently affixed care label, but care instructions must be provided.

- Totally reversible garments without pockets.
- Items that can be washed and drycleaned by the strongest possible method without harm.
- Garments where a label would harm their appearance.

What information is required?

Care labels for textile wearing apparel must provide either washing or drycleaning instructions. **Only one safe method of care is required to be provided regardless of the number of other safe methods that could also be used.** It is important to note that the manufacturer is not required to include information about other care procedures that may not be safe.

Care labels must also warn about any part of a prescribed procedure that is reasonably expected to be used that could harm the garment.

Washing instructions

Washing: The label must indicate whether the product should be washed by hand or machine. The label must also state a water temperature setting, if regular use of hot water will harm the product.



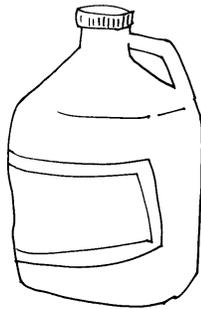
Example

Machine wash,
Warm

Meaning

Use washing machine, warm setting. (Hot water should not be used.)

Bleaching: If any commercially available bleach can be used on a regular basis, the label need not mention bleach. If chlorine bleach would harm the product when used on a regular basis, but regular use of non-chlorine bleach would not, the label must state, "Only non-chlorine bleach when needed." If all commercially available bleaches (including fabric safe bleaches) would harm the product when used on a regular basis, the label must state "No bleach" or "Do not bleach."



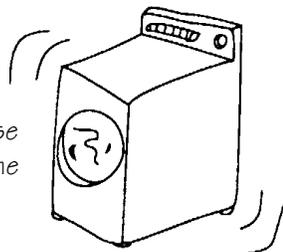
Example

Machine wash,
Warm;
Only non-chlorine
bleach when needed

Meaning

Non-chlorine bleach can be used safely. (Regular use of chlorine bleach would harm the product.)

Drying: The label must identify whether the product would be dried by machine or by some other method. Unless regular use of high temperature will harm the product when machine dried, no temperature setting need be indicated.



Example

Machine wash,
Warm;
Tumble dry

Meaning

Hot, medium or low dryer temperature setting can be used safely.

Ironing: Ironing information must be given on a care label if ironing will be needed on a regular basis. If regular use of a hot iron will not harm a product, no temperature setting need be mentioned.



Example

Machine wash,
Warm;
Tumble dry, Medium;
Warm iron

Meaning

Iron on a medium temperature setting. (The highest setting should not be used.)

Drycleaning instructions

Instructions for drycleaning follow the same pattern as washing instructions. If all commercially available types of solvent can be used, the label need not mention any type of solvent. If one or more solvents would harm the product, a solvent that is safe to use must be mentioned. Any part of the drycleaning process that will harm the product must have a warning on the label. "Do Not, No, Only" or other clear wording must be used.

Example

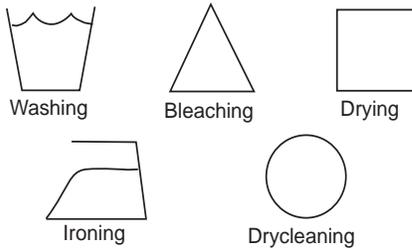
Professionally
dryclean;
Fluorocarbon
or
petroleum

Meaning

Item can drycleaned by any commercial establishment using fluorocarbon or petroleum. (Perchloroethylene solvent should not be used.)

Care label symbols

Beginning July 1, 1997, apparel manufacturers were allowed to start using specific symbols in place of written instructions on care labels. The new symbols must be accompanied by written instructions until December 31, 1998. After January 1, 1999, manufacturers may use the symbols, without written instructions, to communicate care information. As a minimum, laundering instructions include, in order, four symbols: washing, bleaching, drying and ironing. Drycleaning instructions include one symbol.



These care symbols are in effect throughout North America. For more detailed information regarding the care symbols and their meaning, consult SP519 *Care Labels: What Do They Mean*, which is available through your county Extension office.

Faulty care labels

The consumer or drycleaner has followed the care instructions and damage results to the garment. The damage is due to inaccurate care instructions provided by the manufacturer or importer. What can be done to solve the problem?

When a garment fails after following the care label, many consumers simply want the garment failure corrected rather than to return the merchandise. Unless retailers and manufacturers are made aware of the problem, many garment failures will continue because of inadequate or inaccurate care instructions.

The first step after a recommended care procedure fails is to return the garment to the retailer or the place where you purchased it. Speak with someone in customer service or management at the retail business, rather than a sales person. The retailer's responsibility is to stand behind the products it sells. The retailer should compensate the customer in the form of a refund or credit. The retailer should then be given a refund or credit by the manufacturer.

If the retail store will not resolve the problem, ask for the manufacturer's name and address and write to the company. In the letter, provide a full description of the garment and all information given on the tags and labels. Estimate how many times the garment has been washed or drycleaned and provide the full name and address of the store where it was purchased. Send this letter certified mail, return receipt requested. Also, send a copy of your complaint letter to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). Although the FTC cannot resolve the individual's problem, the information may reveal a pattern or practice requiring action by the Commission. Send to: Correspondence Branch, Federal Trade Commission, Washington, DC 20580.

The manufacturer can also be identified by looking for the RN or WPL number. This number is required by law to be provided to the consumer, at time of purchase. This number identifies manufacturers by number. The FTC can identify manufacturers by RN number for consumers by calling (202) 326-3553.

Consumers have responsibilities also. If a consumer chooses not to follow the instructions stated on the care label, garments which fail are the responsibility of the consumer, not the manufacturer or retailer. Consumers are responsible for exercising discrimination in selecting clothing items and for using the article as it was intended. It is also the consumer's responsibility to provide proper care for the clothing item in use, cleaning and storage.



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