Principles for the Use of Abbreviations on Prescription Health Product Labels in Canada

The label of a prescription health product communicates key information about its safe and proper use. The ability to identify, select and administer a product safely is dependent on the user being able to understand the information on the label.[i] An abbreviation is an acronym or shortened form of a word or phrase,[ii] and is often used in healthcare with the intention to convey information more efficiently.[iii]

An abbreviation may have more than one perceived meaning and may be susceptible to misinterpretation–particularly if users are unfamiliar with its intended meaning.[iv] The use of abbreviations to convey health product information has led to serious, even fatal errors.[v] Several patient safety organizations have identified abbreviations which should not be used in healthcare settings to minimize the risk of misinterpretation. These 'dangerous' and 'error-prone' abbreviations were identified from medication incident reviews on a global scale, with many similar findings across Canada,[vi,vii] the United States,[viii,ix] as well as other countries.[x,xi,xii]

The absence of standardized meanings for abbreviated drug name suffixes (e.g., drug name modifiers), the inconsistent use of these types of abbreviations, and the use of multiple modifiers to mean the same thing (e.g., ER, XR, and XL mean *extended release*), can be confusing to users. Misinterpretation of the intended meaning of a modifier has led to medication errors, such as dispensing or administering the wrong drug, wrong formulation, wrong dose, wrong strength, or wrong frequency.[xiii] Medication errors have also occurred within the same product line if the distinguishing modifier was omitted or disregarded when a product was prescribed or dispensed.[xiv]

To provide consistency and direction, ISMP Canada, with support from Health Canada, has developed a list of acceptable abbreviations and abbreviated drug name suffixes, with their intended meanings, for use on prescription health product labels in Canada. National consistency could minimize misinterpretation of information on prescription health product labels for Canadian stakeholders (e.g., manufacturers, healthcare providers, etc.).

ISMP Canada's development of the list of "Acceptable Abbreviations on Prescription Health Product Labels in Canada" (presented below) was guided by the following principles:

General Approach to the Use of Abbreviations

- The use of abbreviations should be minimized[xv] on prescription health product labels and packages.
- The intended meaning of an abbreviation should be consistent and clear to users to minimize misinterpretation and errors.
- An abbreviation should not be ambiguous or otherwise have the potential to be misinterpreted by the user.[xvi]
- Abbreviations should provide information that is useful and easily identifiable to the users (i.e., healthcare providers, patients).[xvii]
- The use of error-prone abbreviations, symbols, and dose designations should be avoided.[xviii,xix,xx,xxi,xxii]
- Stakeholders (e.g., manufacturers, healthcare providers, etc.) should be educated about the risk of misinterpretation and error with the use of abbreviations. This will be a key implementation strategy.

- User comprehension testing for any new abbreviation is highly recommended.[xxiii] User testing can help to determine whether the intended abbreviation is clear and understood.
- Complaint and incident data should be reviewed to identify issues with the use of abbreviations early in the label design process and post-market. Gathering information throughout the product life cycle can assist with the identification of abbreviations that may be misinterpreted by users.
- Periodic review of the list of "Acceptable Abbreviations on Prescription Health Product Labels in Canada" will allow re-assessment of the acceptability of each abbreviation. For example, a previously acceptable abbreviation may become a source of medication error, or another abbreviation may be considered for addition to the list.
- It is essential that the use of abbreviations on prescription health product labels is consistent with regulatory requirements.

Use of Abbreviations for Key Information

- Where possible, express in full any key information[xxiv] in order to minimize the risk of misinterpretation and error.
- The common or proper drug name of a prescription health product should not be abbreviated.[xxv]
- Use international or national standards for abbreviations (e.g., abbreviate "milliliters" as "mL").[xxvi]
- Express in full any uncommon route of administration (e.g., intrathecal), as it may be unfamiliar to users and use of an abbreviation may result in confusion.[xxvii] Abbreviated routes of administration should be explained in full at least once (e.g., outer label) if used on the health product label.[xxviii]
- Abbreviations used on product dose delivery devices should be consistent with abbreviations used on the product labels and packaging, such as label directions, outer packaging (e.g., carton labelling), containers, and any accompanying written materials.[xxix]

Use of Abbreviated Drug Name Suffixes (Abbreviated Modifiers)

- A description should be provided that clearly conveys the meaning of the abbreviated modifier to healthcare providers and patients.[xxx] For example, [Health Product Name]-CR should have 'Controlled Release' below the name.
- The abbreviated modifier should be clear, distinctive and not easily confused with other medical abbreviations (including acronyms, dosing intervals, etc.).[xxxi]
- The abbreviated modifier should have a single and unique meaning.[xxxii]
- The abbreviated modifier should communicate important pharmacological and/or clinical information for the safe and effective use of the prescription health product. The abbreviated modifier should not be used solely as a marketing tool.
- When considering the use of an abbreviated modifier on a prescription health product label, determine whether the proposed modifier is already in use in the marketplace.[xxxiii] Refer to ISMP Canada's list of "Acceptable Abbreviations on Prescription Health Product Labels in Canada" and "ISMP's List of Products with Drug Name Suffixes".[xxxiv] If an existing modifier with the same intended meaning is available, with no incidence of misinterpretation and error, use the existing modifier.[xxxv]
- The use of novel abbreviated modifiers should be minimized, where possible. If a novel modifier is necessary for the safe and effective use of the prescription health product, the rationale/purpose and unique meaning must be provided to Health Canada for approval.

Acceptable Abbreviations on Prescription Health Product Labels in Canada

Abbreviation	Intended Meaning	Sources

Disclaimer: The use of an abbreviation from this list does not guarantee Health Canada product approval. Each health product name, label, and package submission will be thoroughly reviewed within its unique context prior to approval.

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