

Plastic Packages Tough To Crack

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It used to be when you bought something, you could open the package quickly with your hands without risking injury. Good luck with that today. Entombed in blister packs, shackled with 10 feet of twist ties or locked down in riveted hard-plastic clamshells — just try to open these products without resorting to household weaponry.

It's frustrating, if not impossible. For example, opening one product may entail cutting plastic, slicing through thick cardboard, pulling out huge staples and untwisting things.

But it's more than frustration. It's bodily harm, when consumers slash themselves with knives or box cutters.

"We see that type of injury all the time," said Joseph Reuben, an emergency-room physician at Shawnee Mission Medical Center and St. Luke's South Hospital in Kansas City, Kan. "Especially around the holiday season. Mostly hand injuries."

Honestly, does it have to be this tough?

That's the question Consumer Reports poses in this month's issue. The magazine asked online readers to share frustrations about restrictive retail packaging. Some of the implements they reported using to try to open packages?

You guessed it: teeth, fingernails, knives, hacksaws, wire cutters and ice picks.

"We really struck a nerve," said Tod Marks, senior editor for Consumer Reports. "People told us in incredible detail what they went through to open these packages."

People told us, too.

"The thing that drives me the craziest is the Barbie hair," said Mary Roberson, a stay-at-home mom in Olathe, Kan. "They literally stitch it to the package. Here's my poor daughter, dying for her birthday gift, and I'm taking 20 minutes trying to free Malibu Barbie's hair from its little plastic prison without pulling half of it out. It's crazy. I just want to find the person who did this and wring their neck."

Clamshells, Barbie dolls

That frustration is what led the magazine to go in search of America's hardest-to-open package.

The winner: Hard-plastic clamshells complete with pain-in-the-neck rivets. It took Marks more than nine minutes to open a 14-piece cordless phone set encased in such a multiriveted plastic clamshell. Not only was the plastic impossible to open by hand and too thick for scissors, neither brute force nor a screwdriver made any headway against the rivets.

Worse still, Marks said, he could have cut himself on the package's many sharp edges. The only solution was a box cutter, which proved tricky to control around plastic curves and simply added to the danger. He managed to avoid bloodshed but wound up slicing the instruction manual and nearly cutting through battery wires.

Finishing a close second: Toy packaging, including what the magazine called "Prisoner Barbie."

Marks wrote: "Freeing Barbie and her stuff entailed untwisting wires, snapping rubber bands, stripping tape, slicing thick, plastic manacles off her arms and torso, cutting off a tab imbedded in her head, and carefully ripping a seam of stitches securing her tresses to a plastic strip on the back of the box."

The whole process took more than 15 minutes. The only reason this kind of package didn't finish first is that the clamshell package proved more dangerous with its sharp edges.

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Lauren Dougherty, a spokeswoman for Mattel Inc., said Barbie's package is designed to guard the doll from damage during transit, which could be several months.

"In many cases, the journey for our products can be thousands and thousands of miles," she said.

Mattel has heard complaints about the package.

"In some cases, we have redesigned our packages (after) consumer feedback," she said. "But at the end of the day, parents expect quality. When the children open up the toys, we want them to be magical."

Third place went to packaging for CDs, DVDs and video games (jewel cases imprisoned in a difficult-to-remove cellophane skin, complete with security stickers, or "extra armor such as elongated hard-plastic yokes").

Fourth place went to pills in blister packs. One Consumer Reports reader wrote:

"The 'peel off' doesn't peel off. I've tried soaking them in water, Goo Gone, microwaving, knives, scissors, hatchet and .45 caliber!"

Made hard on purpose

But before you go off half-cocked, experts say, just know packages are harder to open today for many reasons, including:

- Federal safety laws that require tamper-evident safety protection on medicines, foods and other consumer products.
- The popularity of warehouse clubs. "Warehouse clubs started the whole revolution in packaging," Marks said. "There are no fancy displays or staff. It's barebones. What the clubs want to be able to do is put (the products) on a fork lift, crack open the box, slice the top off and hang up these perfectly symmetrical clamshells. It protects the package, shows off the products, travels well and protects against thieves."
- More imported products must withstand rigorous overseas voyages to America. Several decades ago, most products came in easy-open cardboard boxes. "Back then, (most everything we bought) was produced domestically," Marks said. "Now many of these products are made abroad. Some spend up to six months going over choppy seas, and they have to be protected."
- Packages must also display the products, since research shows consumers like to see what they are buying.

Packages are asked to do numerous things consumers never think about, says Karen Proctor, chairwoman and professor of the packaging science program at the Rochester Institute of Technology.

"There are a lot of situations where a product is very expensive, and (manufacturers) are trying to give themselves some protection from pilfering," she said. "Take memory for a camera. That product is only an inch by an inch. But it could cost \$30 to \$100. And so you say to yourself, 'What techniques do we have to make this less resistant to stealing?'"

The answer is bulkier, hard-to-open packaging.

The demands on packaging are greater than ever before.

Take potato chip packages, Proctor said. Manufacturers figured out how to keep chips fresher longer. Packaging had to catch up with technology.

"The bag has to keep the chips fresh for up to a month. To do that, packagers pump out most of the oxygen and replace it with nitrogen.

"But people don't know that," she said. "They just never think about all the things packages have to do."