

Curiosity Corner: Plastic packaging

Question: Why do many manufacturers insist on wrapping their products in plastic packaging that is so difficult to open? You often need scissors or some other cutting tool, and even then, it's difficult. (Asked by a curious and frustrated consumer.)



CURIOSITY CORNER
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Reply: I know what you mean about opening those tight plastic wrappers on CDs, DVDs, various items bought in stores or received in the mail, and around the tops of medicine bottles. You would think they are trying to make them adult-proof — or perhaps they're intent on making you break your fingernails. Often times, you'll find misleading creases in the package corners to make you think you can easily pry it open there. Whatever happened to those little red strips you pulled to open these types of things?

Most of us can remember when things were wrapped in cellophane. It was somewhat brittle and tore easily, but the packages sometimes looked like they had been through a war. Then enter plastic shrink-wrap. Let's take a look at how it works.

In a plastic, the polymer molecules are long strands (made up of monomers) that are tangled and randomly oriented. When heated and stretched, the molecules in the polymer film become more aligned and remain this way when cooled. When wrapped around something and then heated, the molecules go back to their disoriented

configuration. The film shrinks and voila! You have a tight, shrink-wrapped package.

Although it is difficult to open, shrink-wrap has many advantages. Because of its (almost) airtight seal, some shrink-wrapped food items are kept fresher. Shrink-wrap makes medicine bottles "tamper-proof." Christmas and Easter baskets can also be shrink-wrapped — thus tamper-proof from marauding candy thieves. And, there is abrasion protection: it prevents CDs and DVDs from getting scratched during shipping and handling. (Warning: you can end up with scratches on these items

when attempting to open with those scissors you mentioned, if you aren't careful!)

So, with my trusty pocketknife, I can usually get into the shrink-wrap. Something that does irk me is the price stickers that are put on those things. When you take them off, so to give a gift without the price tag still attached, the devilish glue stays on the item, and you have one heck of a time getting it off, shrink-wrap or not.

C.P.S. (Curious Postscript): "For every complicated problem, there is a simple, easy-to-understand, wrong answer."

Curious about something? Send your questions to Dr. Jerry D. Wilson, College of Science and Mathematics, Lander University, Greenwood, SC 29649, or email jerry@curiosity-corner.net. Selected questions will appear in the Curiosity Corner. For Curiosity Corner background, go to www.curiosity-corner.net.

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Micah 6:8

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