



SEPTEMBER 2022

DESIGNING THE EVERYDAY FOR A LESS FRUSTRATING LATER LIFE.

A survey by This Age Thing at the Design Age Institute, part of The Royal College of Art and the charity u3a reveals the most frustrating everyday household objects as we age.



Royal College of Art

DESIGN AGE INSTITUTE



**LADY
HAMLYN
FOREWORD**

“DESIGN HAS ALWAYS BEEN IMPORTANT TO ME.”

Design has always been important to me.

My personal journey with design started at the RCA, where I graduated as a fashion designer from the Royal College of Art in the 1950s. My relationship with the RCA continued when I established the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design over 30 years ago. The objective was to focus on the necessity and importance of appropriate design for an ageing population. In other words, 'designing for our future selves'.

I am delighted to introduce this report and survey from the unique partnership between u3a (formerly The University of the Third Age) and the Design Age Institute, part of the Royal College of Art. Everything can be shaped to meet our needs and desires, yet many common household items are infuriating to most of us, as this survey clearly shows, and present impossible barriers to some. This is a clear failure of design.

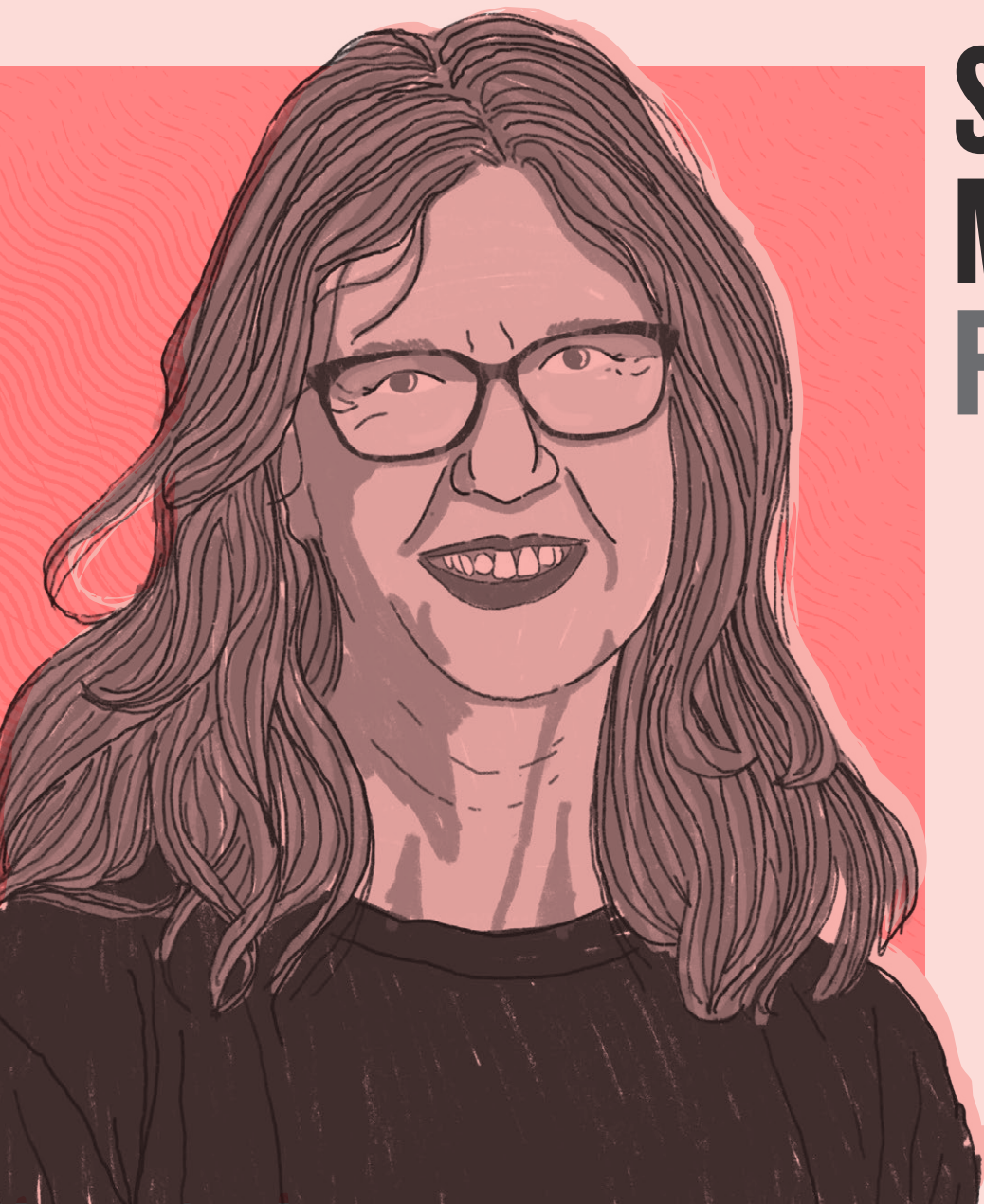
I have supported inclusive design initiatives for over 30 years and amongst the many frustrations that we all have to face daily, packaging comes up time and time again. The fact that packaging is still seen as the

most frustrating household object, is deeply saddening. It seems that no amount of demonstration or guidance seems to make an impact. It would seem only legislation will bring about the change needed. It is with great excitement that I support the partnership between over 400,000 u3a members and the Design Age Institute's bid to get the issue of ageist packaging discussed in parliament and the journey to create and enforce minimum inclusive design standards. The design of buildings has had this for decades, making them inclusive for as wide a percentage of the population as possible. It is time, simply put, for that exact same logic and commitment to be applied to other areas of life. It is no longer acceptable to exclude and marginalise some of the most vulnerable in society for profit, or out of ignorance.

Helen Hamlyn

Founder, The Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design, RCA





**SAM
MAUGER
FOREWORD**

“PEOPLE DON'T STOP CARING ABOUT DESIGN ONCE THEY REACH THE AGE OF 60”

The u3a is pleased to be working with the Royal College of Art to put older voices at the heart of good design. Our first survey together has focused on improving the design of everyday objects – and I am delighted that our members have contributed to this. We have all struggled at some time with opening badly designed packaging but for those with reduced dexterity or strength this is even more so and can be difficult and disruptive to their everyday life. u3a wants to see a world where age and disability friendly packaging is standard.

Our movement is made up of more than 400,000 members who are the living proof of the major benefits of staying active and engaged throughout your life. Our members learn together, pursue new interests and form strong and meaningful relationships with a sense of community, social wellbeing, fellowship and belonging. u3a members want to be involved in shaping their future –

including a future where the design of products and services is inclusive and automatically considers the requirements of older adults as standard.

People don't stop caring about design once they reach the age of 60 and so we are delighted that this important work with the Royal College of Art is giving us the opportunity to make our voices heard. This is an important year for us – marking our 40th anniversary of the u3a movement – and we are looking forward to many more exciting opportunities with the Royal College of Art to work to shape the future of design for older people and challenge and transform the negative stereotypes about ageing and older people.

Sam Mauger
CEO, Third Age Trust





**PATTIE
MOORE
FOREWORD**

“THE BEST THINGS COME IN INCLUSIVE PACKAGES.”



One of my earliest childhood memories is that of Daddy being called to the kitchen to open a difficult jar. Mother would be preparing our breakfast, a daily drill of efficiency, when the routine would come to a screeching halt, as she struggled unsuccessfully with the lid of a new jar of jam. Dutifully, Daddy would appear, tucking the morning paper under his arm, as he demonstrated superior strength, and handed his beloved the jar and its lid. They would exchange a smile, a kiss, and the meal would finally begin.

In 1994, one of the RCA's first corporate collaborations, negotiated by Prof Roger Coleman, was with Rockware Glass and the Safeway supermarket chain. Tasked with the challenge to create a glass jar that could be managed without an adaptive device or strongman, Ceramics and Glass student, Gavin Pryke, conceived a beautiful new jar shape, with a square lid that is easier for consumers of all ages to grasp, twist, and open. A brilliant example of what American Industrial Designer Tucker Viemeister calls “Beautility”, the square lid demonstrates the vital role of innovative creativity in addressing lifespan autonomy and independence.

Nearly thirty years on, packaging design continues to confound consumers of all ages and abilities with everything from simple nuisances, to causes of critical injuries. Throughout each and every day of our lives, we are confronted by packaging for our food, our hygiene, our health management, and maintenance of our homes. Inability to properly manage those packages puts at risk our ability to live independently, eat nutritiously, maintain wellness, and sustain our abodes. Inclusive, holistic design is the critical key for life's quality.

I typically challenge Designers to develop packages and products that can be managed with one hand, and preferably, the non-dominant extremity. Imagine the busy,

multi-tasking parent, holding their precious crying baby, while wrestling with the preparation of a bottle, and now think of a doting grandparent, desperate to help, but their arthritic fingers unable to manage the task. Design must always attempt to address and answer the complex conundrum of equity for the entirety of our lives, with all of the distinguishing attributes of capacity's ebbing and flow. Anything less is more than unacceptable. It is unethical and inhumane.

Recalling the last time you sat in a chair at a conference, you no doubt will remember complaining about the uncomfortable design, and your observation is quite right. The creation of chairs to be quickly arranged and removed from a meeting space is not predicated on the comfort of the human experience, but rather on the ease and rapidity of unstacking, restacking and storing away. Likewise, the manufacture of far too much of today's packaging is based on the costs and requirements for shipment and anti-theft and pilferage at the point of sale, and not the ease and safety of use.

In my mother's last, and 89th year, I was helping in the kitchen, when she handed me a stubborn jar. I showed her the trick of a firm tap of the upside down lid on the countertop, breaking the vacuum seal, and turning the lid open with relative ease. We laughed as she reflected, “It was more fun making your Father do it.” I have to agree, but in the absence of Daddy, I am grateful for the ultimate solution, Good Design.

Patricia Moore PhD
President MooreDesign Associates



SUMMARY

What's the problem?

Anyone can get frustrated by the design of some everyday objects, but as people get older these frustrations can escalate. Some everyday objects aren't designed with older people in mind and this can result in unnecessary difficulty and stress, as well as longer term impacts on health and wellbeing.

What did we do?

This Age Thing at The Design Age Institute part of the Royal College of Art and the charity u3a joined forces to find out from older people themselves which everyday items are the most frustrating and why, with a view to paving the way for change. We surveyed over 2000 u3a members.

What did we find?

60% of those surveyed reported that food and medical packaging were the household items that caused the most frustration. Packaging wasn't the only frustration, members also reported difficulties with duvet covers, TV remotes, high cupboards,

keys and locks, plugs, too many controls on white goods, vacuum cleaners, and small keys on computers and mobile phones.

People's responses indicated that difficulties with packaging were not limited to older people or those with a health condition. Respondents shared their strategies to overcome some of the difficulties, including the use of tools to aid opening packaging, some of which were described as dangerous.

What does this mean?

Our findings point to the pervasive nature of poorly designed packaging, the associated stress it causes on a daily basis, and the potentially detrimental impact these daily frustrations have on health and wellbeing. Good design matters and there is clearly room for improvement.

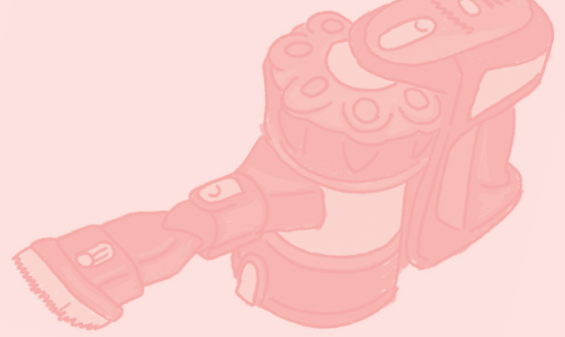
What needs to change?

Packaging needs to be designed better to minimise avoidable frustrations and harm. Older people should be involved and consulted in the design process from the beginning.



WHAT WILL WE DO NEXT?

- 1.** Launch a petition to call for more inclusively designed packaging.
- 2.** Carry out more research with design institutions and businesses to look at the impact of poorly designed packaging on the health and well being of people as they age.
- 3.** Set up an online resource to support people to find tools and devices to help open packaging more easily and safely.
- 4.** Work with industry to design better and more inclusive products and services which put older people at the heart of the design process.



ABOUT THE REPORT

The Royal College of Art, through the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design, has worked to improve the design of everyday objects on and off for nearly three decades. This sits side by side with other academic research across the world which explores and supports the importance of inclusive design.

The aim of this report is not to provide a review of this literature or add to cutting edge research. Rather, the intention of this new collaboration between the Royal College of Art and u3a, and the report in particular, is to foreground the experiences of real people and use this as a platform to inspire action and change.

ABOUT THE SURVEY

To launch our collaboration, we conducted a survey to find out which objects in our homes frustrate, annoy, niggle, or downright make us want to scream. The aim was to identify the everyday items that cause most frustration.

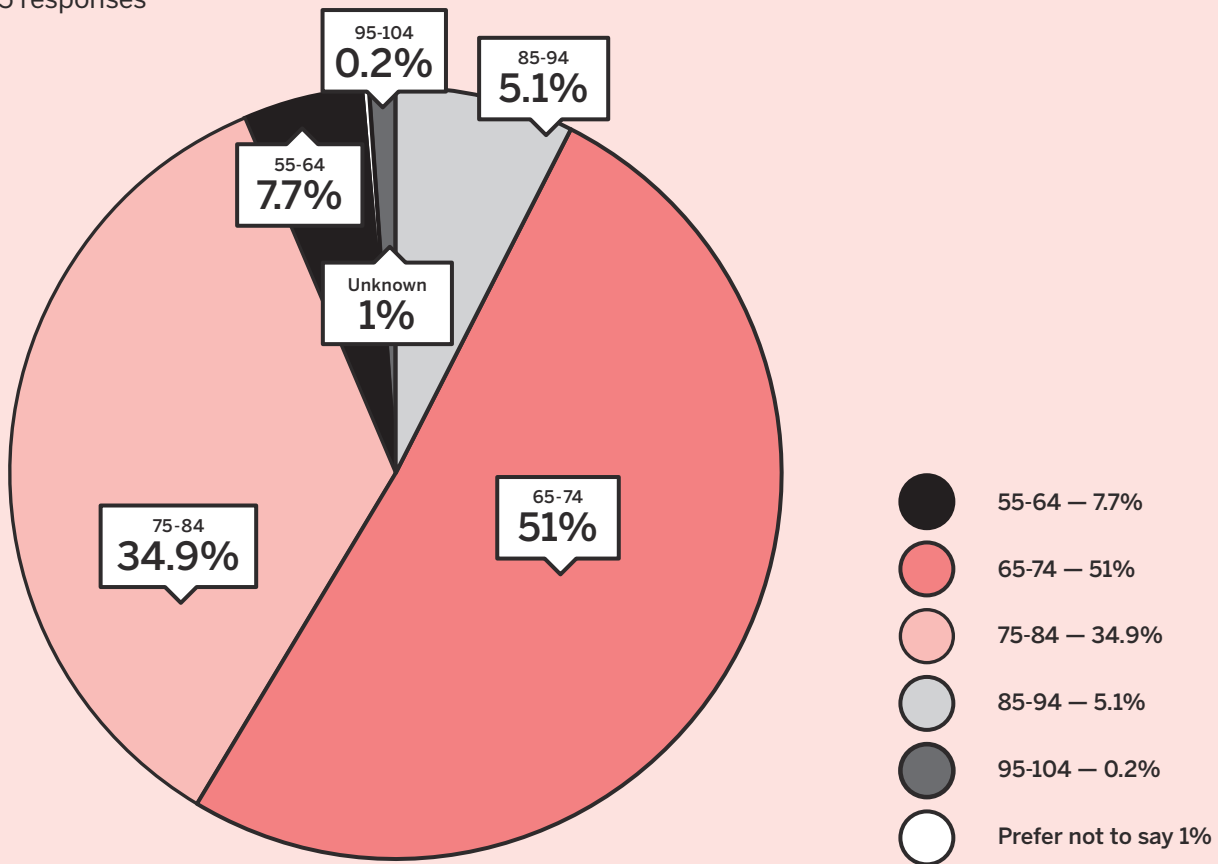
Over 2000 u3a members responded to the online survey in just 48 hours. It had certainly hit a nerve.

Respondents were aged between 55 and 104. The majority were aged between 55 and 74 (59%), with over 100 people (5%) over 95.



Age Bracket

2,035 responses



MAIN FINDINGS

The biggest stress factors identified in our homes were related to packaging, with over 60% of all respondents choosing packaging as their main frustration. Almost 50% identified food packaging as a real frustration, while medical packaging was found to cause irritation and stress by 13% of those surveyed. All types of food packaging came under criticism — ring pulls, glass jars, clingfilm, peel-back labels, and resealable packaging.

Other everyday household items which were identified as causing significant frustration and annoyance were duvet covers (13%), TV remotes (5%), high cupboards (5%), and keys and locks (4%).

Plugs (too low down and difficult to remove), too many controls on white goods, vacuum cleaners (too heavy), and small keys on computers and mobile phones (difficult to type without making typing errors) were also mentioned.

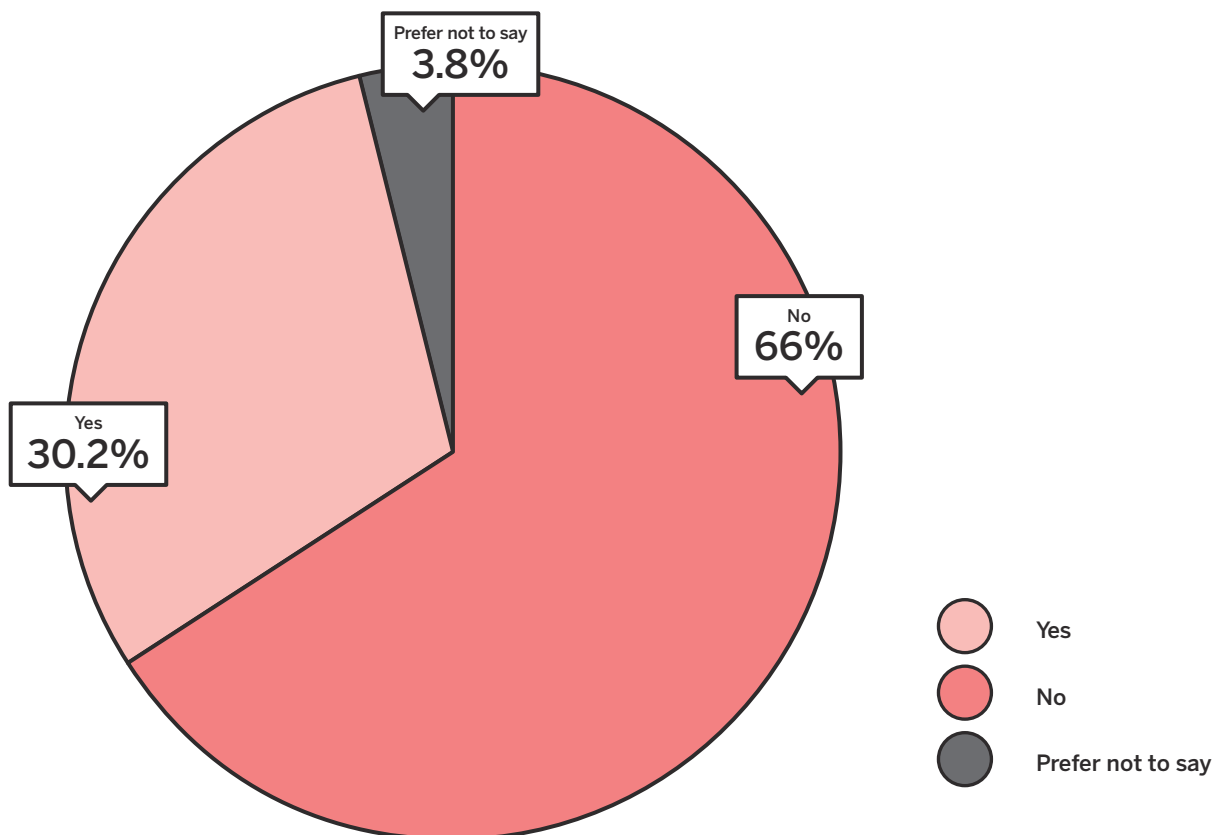
Only 1% of respondents said there was nothing badly designed in their homes.

CHALLENGES WITH OR WITHOUT A HEALTH CONDITION

Everyday objects caused stress and frustration regardless of whether people had a health condition. About a third of respondents reported to have a mental or physical disability or long term health condition, and yet the majority reported to experience challenges with everyday items.

Would you describe yourself as having a mental or physical disability or long term condition?

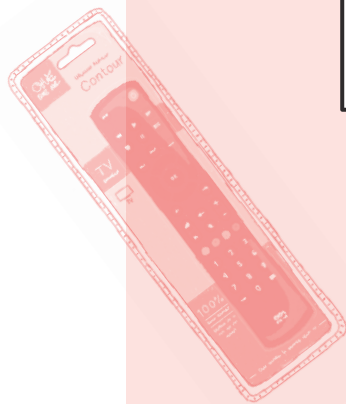
2,035 responses





Even without a health condition or physical impairment, packaging caused unnecessary frustration and stress:

“I don’t have arthritic hands, but they are not as strong as they once were (or it may be that jar and bottle tops are harder to open). I find it very difficult to open some jars and bottles. I try all the old tricks like holding the item under hot water so that the glass and the metal expand at different rates. Sometimes I just eat and drink something else.”




“Sometimes even scissors can’t penetrate the plastic and I have to use a knife; it is so dangerous. I am not disabled in any way, but I always find these difficult and having recently broken my wrist, I find them completely impossible.”

Medicinal packaging was also an issue for many u3a members - for those on several daily medications, blister packs and the smallness of medication was a significant cause of stress and anxiety. As one u3a member said:

“I could be dead before I get to the item.”

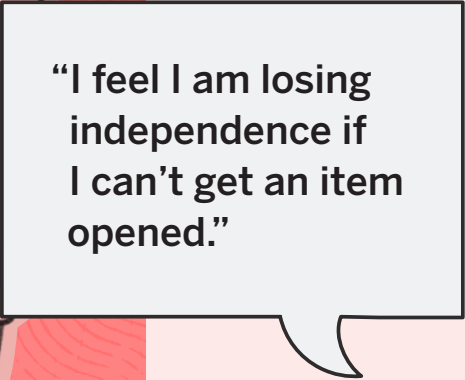




“I feel so old and incompetent not being able to do it myself.”

IMPACT OF POOR DESIGN

Not being able to get into a jar or a can, a pint of milk, or a loaf of bread negatively affected how respondents thought about themselves:



“I feel I am losing independence if I can’t get an item opened.”



COMMON HACKS TO MANAGE DIFFICULT PACKAGING

u3a members shared their hacks to manage difficult packaging which included:

Using tools:

Using nails to pierce plastic

Scissors

Knives

Pliers

Nutcrackers

Asking others to help:

Neighbours

Partners

Children

Grandchildren

Getting shop assistants to open items before they left a store

Buying purpose built gadgets:

Crocodile Jaws

Other:

Heating lids

Several respondents shared that they had found 'tools' to help them on a daily basis, but even with these devices, there were daily battles:

“Even with a variety of gadgets which are supposed to help, I find some lids impossible to open.”

“Without the scissors or a sharp knife, I would probably die of starvation.”

“I have a gadget called Crocodile Jaws which has several different sized jaws for gripping onto the metal tops of jars – brilliant. However, so many tops are now designed with sloping sides which means that the jaws will not grip. Bring back straight sides please.”



CHILDPROOF OR HUMAN-PROOF?

Many u3a members explained 'childproof' bottles aren't just a problem for older people with health conditions such as arthritis or osteoporosis:

"I have arthritis, but my grandson can't open them."

"I had to return a fertiliser bottle to the store because I couldn't open it. Even the macho manager couldn't open it."

Bleach bottles, in particular, were cited as the main culprit with over 100 complaints:

"Bleach bottles! I don't know anyone who finds it easy."

"It is human-proof!! I have to get help opening it initially then dare not replace the lid securely as I'd be unlikely to be able to reopen it. So then I run the risk of bleach spillage. There are a number of similarly poorly designed containers which are not amenable to the usual lid openers."





LABELLING IS TOO SMALL AND DOESN'T STAND OUT

Labelling on packaging also caused frustration. The key information was seen to be too small, even for those with good eyesight:

“My eyesight is good. I wear glasses, but nothing out of the ordinary, but some publications, particularly instructions for use, are printed in colour on backgrounds which make reading very difficult. Decent size, 10pt plus, black on white would be easy to achieve in most cases.”

“My eyesight is good, but I am long-sighted. When I get in the shower without spectacles it is often difficult to read the labels of items such as shampoo or conditioner to know which is which. Often the brand name is large enough to be clear, but the product name is too small.”

In addition, recycling information on all packaging was unclear and confusing, not to mention the excessive amount of packaging.

“I like to recycle where possible to help the environment but it is often difficult because so much plastic is not marked clearly to identify if it is recyclable or not so I don't recycle in case.”

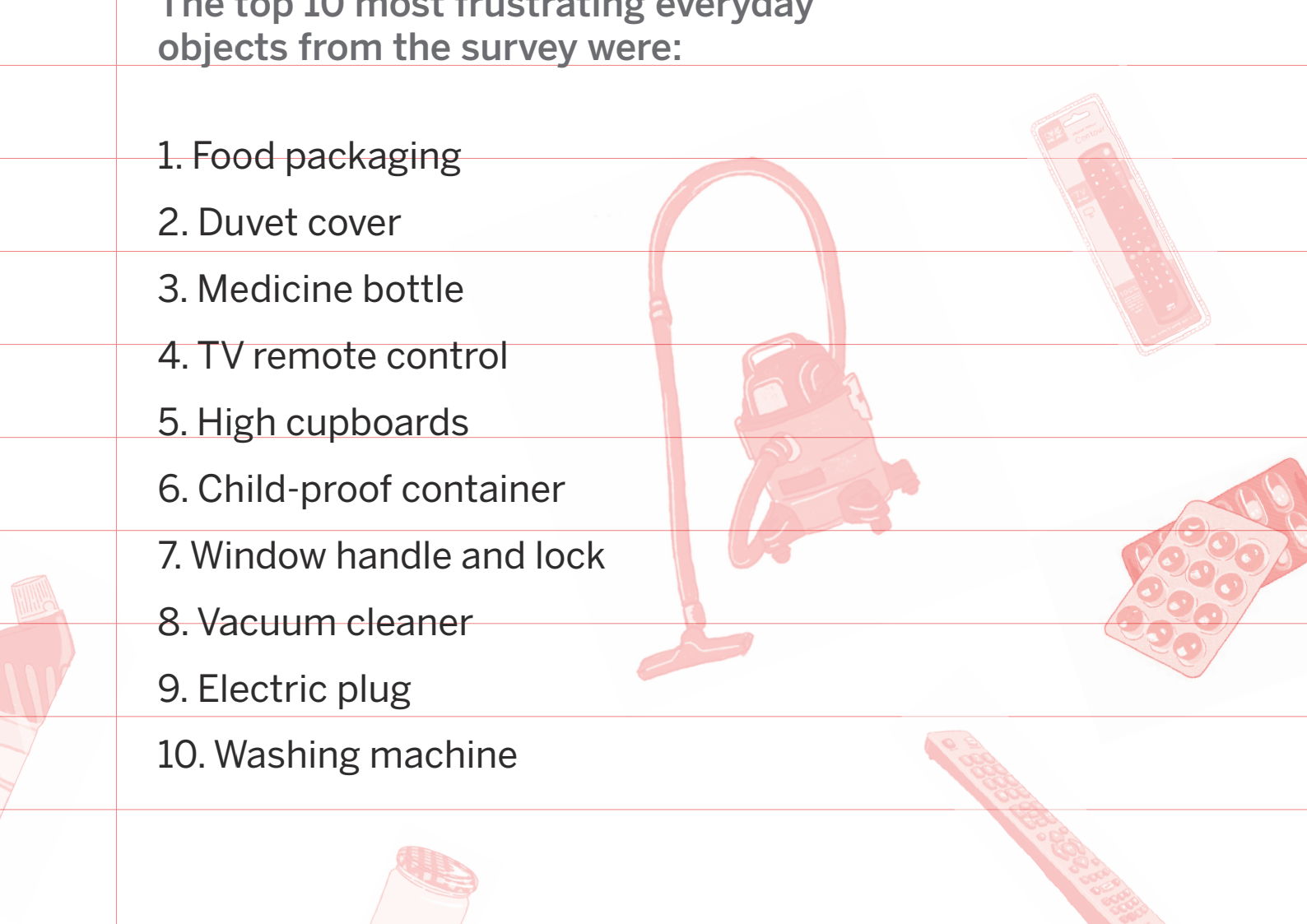
Many respondents had environmental concerns and too much packaging, particularly plastic, was a significant source of frustration.



MOST FRUSTRATING ITEMS

While packaging in general was the biggest frustration the individual items which came up again and again are as follows:

The top 10 most frustrating everyday objects from the survey were:

1. Food packaging
 2. Duvet cover
 3. Medicine bottle
 4. TV remote control
 5. High cupboards
 6. Child-proof container
 7. Window handle and lock
 8. Vacuum cleaner
 9. Electric plug
 10. Washing machine
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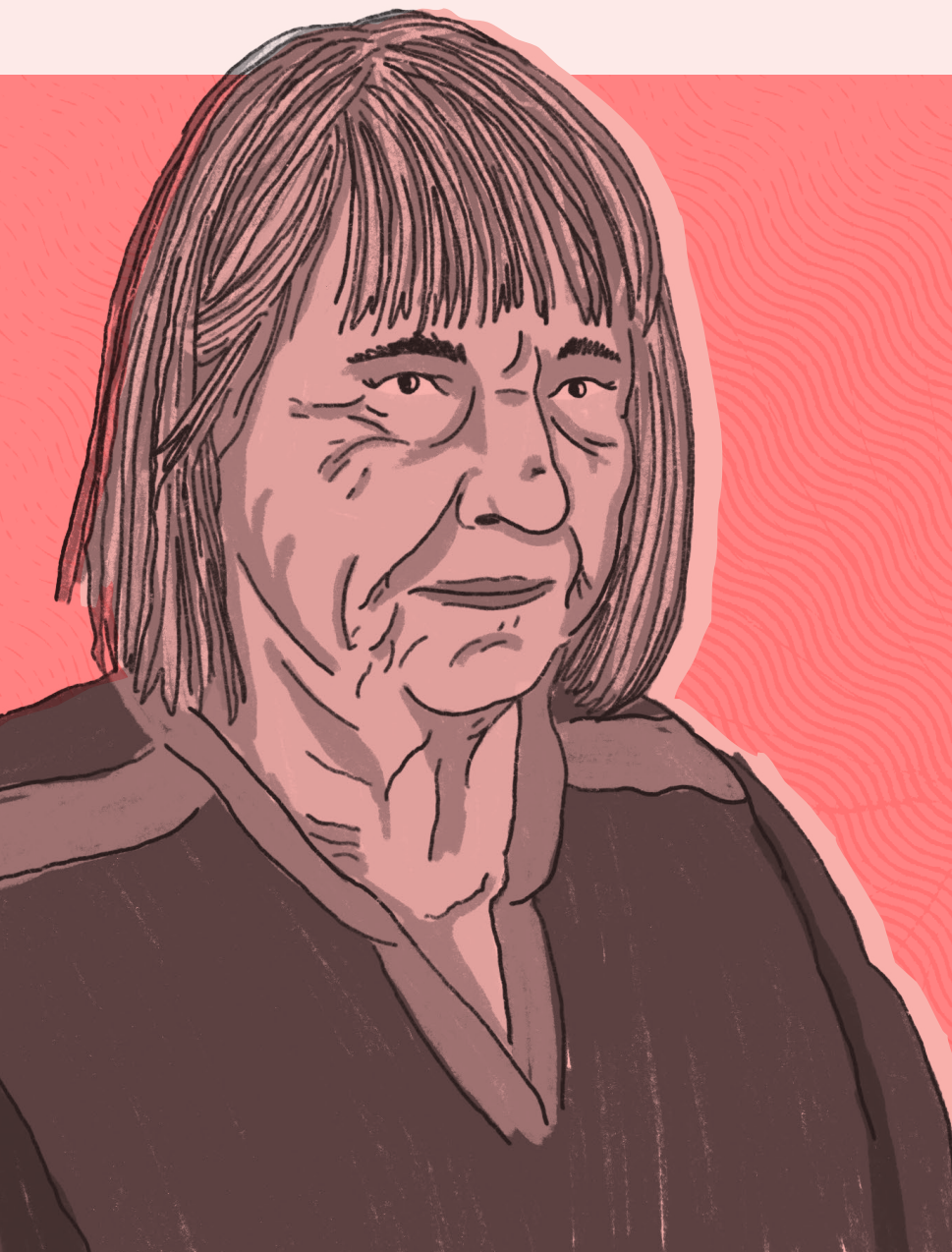
Here is a list of products and everyday frustrations mentioned in the survey

Baby bio bottles (opening)	Meat (supermarket packaging can only be half recycled)
Battery packaging	Medicine packaging
Bleach bottles (opening)	Microwave oven controls (too many options)
Blister packs	Mobile phones (buttons too small for swollen fingers)
Boiler clocks (fiddly to change)	Mobile phones (buttons too small for big fingers)
Biscuit packaging	Mobile phones (difficult to read)
Bubble packaging	Mouthwash bottles
Buttons	Paracetamol
Central heating controls (confusing)	Plastic around bread
Cereal packaging	Plastic milk tops
Childproof catches on washing machine capsules	Plastic seals around yoghurt pots
Childproof packaging	Plugs
Click on lids	Pull tabs on yoghurt pots
Cling film (starting it off)	Pumps on soap
Computers (too many gadgets)	Razor packaging
Cooking instructions on packaging (too small)	Recycling messages (confusing)
Corned beef ring pull	Replacing hearing aid batteries
Cylindrical plastic package with a lid that wouldn't twist off	Resealable packs
Dishwashers (too many buttons)	Ring pull on cans (spilling or cutting skin)
Door knobs (difficult to turn)	Sardine tins (ring pulls)
Drink can pulls	Sachets that say, 'tear here'
Duvet cover fasteners (also duvets are difficult to change by yourself)	Scissors in blister packs
Electric plugs which are too tight in the wall	Screw lids
Electric plugs which are too low down	Sealable packs (difficult to open and then to keep closed)
Eye drop bottles	Shampoo and conditioner (difficult to see which is which in shower)
Fire alarms (difficult to replace batteries)	Small type
Food labels (print too small)	Televisions
Food labels (colour contrasts too difficult to read)	Tetra Packs
Fruit wrapped in cellophane	Tin openers
Garlic crushers (too much garlic wasted)	Tins of tuna
Gherkins (difficult to open)	Toilet levers (needs pressure)
Jam (difficult to open)	Toothpaste (opening the foil tab)
Jars (difficult to open)	Vacuum packed food (difficult to open)
Jars of beetroot (difficult to open)	Vegetables wrapped in cellophane
Jars of pickled onions (difficult to open)	Washing machines which were too low to load
High cupboards	Washing machine controls (too many options)
Hot water bottles (difficult to replace stopper)	Washing pod containers
Hoover (heavy)	Window handles
Hoover (battery dies too quickly)	Wine (screw top and cork)
House alarm (difficult to replace batteries)	
Locks (all different and hard to open)	



In this section we look in depth at the particular issues experienced as a person grows older with a health condition such as arthritis.

We spoke to three of the survey respondents in more detail.

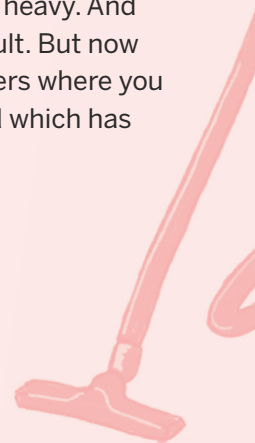
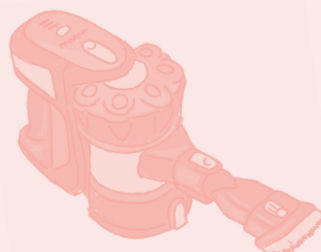


I'M LIZ CORRY

69, from Newcastle

Liz, what is your biggest household frustration?

Throughout my life I've always had very poor wrist strength. I have always struggled with opening jars, taking tops off bottles. Anything like that has been difficult. I have always had to ask friends to open things for me. I struggle with cleaning, especially hoovering. I've recently got myself one of those much lighter ones which you can carry around. I used to have a proper, old fashioned one. It was very heavy. And doing the stairs was difficult. But now I've got one of these hoovers where you just stick a tool on the end which has made a huge difference.



Why did you wait so long to get a new vacuum which didn't cause you difficulties?

To be truthful, I could have afforded to buy one of the new types of hoovers but I didn't, as my old Hoover was still going after 30 years. It was difficult to justify getting a new one. It is probably something harking back to my parents' era, where you didn't waste things which are still going strong. Why would I change it? Why would I spend money on it? And it wasn't until I was left some money that I thought why not.

Do you consider yourself as having any particular challenge, let's say a physical or cognitive one, which makes everyday life at home harder?

I've got arthritis. At the moment, it's not too challenging. I have a lot of lower back pain and some stiffness. I can't do any housework in the mornings, for instance, because it takes my body some time to warm up in the morning.

How does it make you feel?

To be honest I am very laid back about most things and take things as they come. But on a bad day, not being able to get into jars, makes me want to throw it against the wall. It makes me feel frustrated. I suppose because I have always had this difficulty I have just got used to it on the whole.

It is a funny thing getting older. Sometimes I go out of the house, go out to the car and feel like I'm just 35. But I'm not. I'm 69. You know, and some days you feel fitter than others. And you know, you don't feel your age at all and you don't think about it.

Have you ever had an accident trying to open a jar or bottle?

Yes. Something happened to me just recently. I did something stupid and I feel so embarrassed about it. I was looking after a friend at her own home. She was poorly and fast asleep. I couldn't get the top off a milk container. It felt like it was glued, where the milk had dried inside. I went to get a knife out of the drawer and tried to release the top. The knife slipped and it went straight into my hand. I ended up having to go to A&E because the wound was very deep. It was a foolish thing to do really, but looking back, that is what the frustration makes you do, something which is a little daft. It could happen to anyone.

Have you got any sort of life hacks which make it easier to open jars and milk bottles at home?

If I was in my own flat I know where I can find

one of the textured rubber gadgets which make it easier for me to get into things. But not being in my own flat and not wanting to wake up my sick friend I did something silly. And I think people can easily do that.

Does your rubber grip device make a difference?

Not always. It can do. When you come across difficulties in your own home you try and find a way around them. And you learn what works and what doesn't. I won't be using a knife to loosen a milk bottle top again!

Were you surprised that packaging was the biggest frustration of your fellow u3a members?

No. Not at all. And I wasn't surprised to read that childproof bottles and bleach bottles were mentioned many times. Childproof bottles are particularly frustrating especially when there is no chance of a child ever touching them.

What would you say to the businesses and the designers who are making and designing the packaging and the products you use?

Well, whatever they do, they should ask older people's opinion, to see if whatever they decide to do works. They need to have more respect for old age. Surely there must be some new easy packaging to keep things fresh and easier to open? There is an ageing population out there, and businesses and designers need to have more respect for the older population. It really is so important to consult with us.

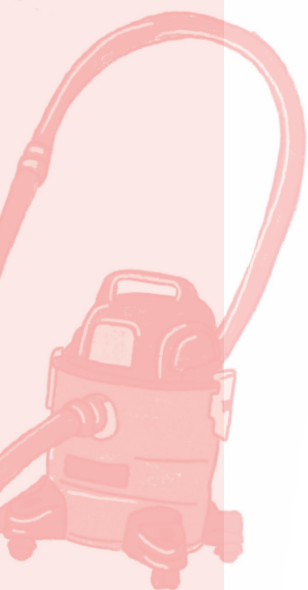
Do you find the wastefulness of packaging frustrating?

Yes, I do. I know some supermarkets are starting to have areas where the plastic packaging can be returned. If I had one in my area I would definitely use it. We used to have paper bags. And they worked just as well.

Also huge packs, apart from toilet paper, are not appropriate for my age range. People are living on their own and smaller amounts are better.

Do you find the wastefulness of packaging frustrating?

Yes. Definitely.





I'M BRIAN PEARSON

75, from Manchester

Brian, what is your biggest household frustration?

The first thing that frustrates me is that my house is cold. It is a big Victorian semi, which is very hard to insulate. I guess we should move somewhere else. But we are coping. We have to have the heating on almost all the time even with solar panels.

But my other frustration is the size of food portions. Manufacturers seem to cater just for families. They don't seem to cater for people living by themselves or people living with a partner. If you ask anybody who's retired most of them I am sure would say that the portions are just too big. My wife and I buy food for single people because the portions are so big. If some of the food manufacturers started producing portion sizes for older people living alone or with just a partner they'd be onto a winner.

Do you consider yourself as having any particular challenge, let's say a physical or cognitive one, which makes getting into packaging harder?

I have arthritis and osteoarthritis. I am prescribed paracetamol every day for the pain. It is the primary medication for arthritis and yet the packaging makes it so difficult to get into.

Have you got any sort of life hacks which make it easier to get into the paracetamol?

I do. I bought a gadget but it doesn't work well. It's quite fiddly. And you still have to use a huge amount of pressure. So I came up with my own gadget. I realised that if I could create a slit at the top of the pill it would make getting it out a lot easier. I started by using a knife but then I had the idea of growing one of my fingernails. It works incredibly well.

Do you think it's because of arthritis you struggle getting into the packaging? Or is it just the packaging is badly designed?

I think it is badly designed for everybody. My arthritic fingers aren't too bad, but they do lock up and I find myself really struggling to do anything when they are like that. It can be very painful. If it is a bad morning, it is hard to get the pills out at all. Paracetamol is the most sold medication in the world, yet it feels like the main priority is to get the costs right down and for the manufacturers to make a profit rather than think about the people who are using it. What I find frustrating is that some brands of paracetamol are much easier to use than others. The film is much easier to push through to get the pills out. Why can't there be a standard?

How does it make you feel when you can't get into these things?

I feel excluded. It feels like everybody else can do this easily and you can't. I was a finance director for 30 years before I retired. Having retired you're bombarded with adverts for stair lifts and walking sticks and products for old people all the time. It is so depressing. So when I can't do something like open a packet of paracetamol it makes me feel isolated. I work hard to counteract these feelings. I don't wear beige, I wear Paul Smith and dress differently to counteract the negative feelings. That's a conscious decision. I will not go down that negative. I refuse to. I am actually chair of our u3a locally and since I became chairman, we have decided to look forward. We are trying to give people a different approach to being old or getting old. It is about looking forward and not looking back.

Were you surprised that packaging was the biggest bugbear of your fellow u3a members?

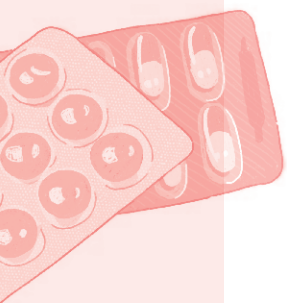
No. Packaging is difficult once you get older, well it's tricky for any age, but particularly once you get older. Packaging is often very hard to open, and once it's open, the stuff in the packaging rarely comes out properly. It is just so wasteful as well. Things are improving on the recycling front. You can now split your packaging up so you can recycle one bit and sometimes all of it. I can well remember the days when the whole thing just went in the bin. Medicine packaging is particularly wasteful. They reprint the instructions for medicines that you are using time and time and time again. Every time you open the package, you have this huge sheet of paper in 10 languages you didn't read. You already know what side effects were in and how to take it. Why do I need it again?

What would you say to the businesses and the designers who are making and designing the packaging and the products you use?

Ask us. We are the ones using it. With the NHS, we get free prescriptions. So I suppose we're actually not the customers. As a consumer, we're not as important because that buying decision is taken away from us. With medicine, that choice is to a large extent with the NHS and we are not considered. So we basically get what we are given. And you're expected to be very grateful for it. With everything else in my life, I have a choice. With my medicine I just get what I'm given.

I think designers need to think about the continuity of the design of the packaging for medicines. Changing the colour and the designs of the packaging can be confusing when it is changed. This could be potentially dangerous.

I think designers just don't know what is happening in the real world. I do wonder how much feedback they get when they design these packages. I know they spend so much effort on the clinical trials, but I wonder if they consider how they should package it. Who's going to use it? Will it be the right colour so that people can recognise what they're taking every day? Maybe if they did, I wouldn't have to struggle so much.





I'M CHRISTINE DUNN

Everybody calls me Tina.
73, from sunny Stockport.

Tina, what is your most frustrating household item?

My most frustrating household items are mainly to do with packaging. Especially bleach bottles. They go too far the other way. I know, everything's got to be child safe. But it makes it very difficult for folks. I have arthritis and sciatica. My hands don't work the same as they used to. I waste so much time trying to get into packaging.

Almost as frustrating as packaging are household appliances. They are all so heavy. I bought a carpet cleaner recently but I can't lift it up. A waste of time and money.



How does your arthritis and sciatica affect you?

I've lost the mobility of my fingers. They don't work as well. I can't do the little things like putting my earrings in. It takes forever. The sciatica started after I left work. I had a job that was quite physical. I was a radiographer in the NHS. I worked in the mammogram units. It was a physical job and my spinal cord became pinched. I have lost my strength and it makes everything frustrating.

Before your arthritis started to make things difficult, did you find opening packaging such as childproof caps difficult?

Not as bad as now. It has become so much more difficult. Trying to get a toothbrush out of packaging for example is such hard work. I am going to stab myself with a knife one of these days trying to get into the packs with the double plastic. The real madness is buying a new pair of scissors. You need a pair of scissors to get into the packaging with the scissors. And then there are the washing machine pods. You end up taking bits off that you shouldn't. It is just the general day to day awkwardness of anything that you pick up and try to open. It seems to have become so much harder, it really does.

How does it make you feel when you can't get into these things?

I suppose I have just accepted it, as it has gone on for so long. I often ask at the till for products to be taken out of the plastic. I then throw the packaging away in the bin at the shop. What a waste of packaging!

How do I feel? Frustrated? Especially with my medicine. It takes me the best part of an hour when I sit down and fill those little boxes. Because it is such a horrible job I sort my pills once every four weeks. As people get older there are more and more tablets while they want to keep us going as long as we can. I take at least nine a day. I need a nail to crack the packaging to get them out. I just can't push them out.

Have you spoken to your doctors and chemist about the difficulties you have?

The alternative is to have them do it. For the pills to be brought to you in trays. I've got no desire to lose any of my independence. Some of the tablets are so hard to open to get the tablets out due to the packaging but I have just accepted this as a reality. I have to keep going as long as I can. You've got to just work through the pain, just get on with it.

Have you changed your behaviour when you are considering buying household items?

I constantly think about how heavy new items are. Take hoovers, for example, which are too heavy to carry upstairs. I have resorted to having one Hoover upstairs and one downstairs. But not everyone can afford that.

Were you surprised that packaging was the biggest bugbear of your fellow u3a members?

No. Because it is something that affects us each and every day. It is a constant daily niggle. Even my grandkids can't get into packaging, such as cereal packaging. No one can get into them easily.

Are there any devices that you use to help you open jars, bottles, packets etc?

Time. Getting into anything just takes time. You just have to keep going until you can get things opened like screw tops. You just keep going till it's done. For opening jars, I have a device that was my mother's. I found it when I was clearing the house after she died. I never thought I'd need any of these things. And one of my biggest frustrations is the tomato sauce bottle. That plastic on the top, why does it have to be tightly stuck on and so difficult to get off?

What would you say to the businesses and the designers who are making and designing the packaging and the products you use?

I would start by asking, "how do you expect us to get into them? Does everything need to be stuck down so hard? Can you not make hoovers lighter? Can you test on people of all ages?" There must be alternatives. It all comes down to cost I am sure. You know, they'll just do it the cheapest way. Even getting into a packet of biscuits today is a battle.

And then there is the waste. The way they wrap meat up in these plastic trays. You can't recycle those. I mean, it's so depressing, isn't it when you come back from the supermarket and you start and you see all this awful plastic chucked in the bin.

Would you buy a product if it was more expensive but you knew it was easier to use?

I'd go for the easy one, definitely. I will give you a good example. I get my milk from the milkman. It is so easy to open. Just gently press the top and you are in.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Packaging is the everyday household item that causes the most annoyance and frustration to older people according to a survey with over 2000 u3a members. Packaging (food, household, and medical) was viewed as the biggest stress for over 60% of all respondents. This was a frustration felt by people of all ages between 55 and 104 including people with no common health complaints such as arthritis.

Additional frustrating everyday items that were revealed by the survey were duvet covers, TV remotes, high cupboards, keys and locks, plugs (too low down and difficult to remove), too many controls on white goods, vacuum cleaners (too heavy), and small keys on computers and mobile phones (difficult to type without making typing errors).

Only 1% of all respondents said there was nothing badly designed in their homes.

Respondents shared information to indicate that the difficulties they experienced had the potential to lead to both physical and psychological harm.

Almost everyone surveyed encountered daily frustrations, annoyance, and stresses associated with the design of everyday objects. Why should we worry about this? Aren't these just the challenges that we have as we get older?

Negative age stereotypes are so embedded in society that when we can't do something when we are older, we think it is because we are no longer able. It feeds into our negative stereotypes about getting older and we start to believe that it is because of our age that we can't do something.

Research by Professor Becca Levy shows that if we have a more negative view of ageing then it starts to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.¹ Levy has found that negative age beliefs can impact everything from memory, dexterity, gait, balance, speed even the will to live. Her research has shown that people with a more positive view of ageing live on average 7.5 years more than those who have a negative view, even after factoring out diet, exercise, social status and education.²

In her book, Levy talks about how if we lose our keys when we are younger we don't assume it is because our memory is failing. However, when we lose our keys when we are older our first assumption is often that it is due to our memory. This assumption is based on the societal narrative linking age and memory loss. Societal age beliefs affect our individual beliefs, so that if we can't do something as we get older then we believe it must be because we are the problem, not the design.

Research like Levy's indicate that designers need to consider age when designing everyday items. Too many of us are impeded in our lives by poor design.

1 Levy (2022). Breaking the Age Code.

2 Levy et al (2002). Longevity increased by positive self-perceptions of ageing. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83(2):261-70. doi: 10.1037//0022-3514.83.2.261.

WHAT NEXT

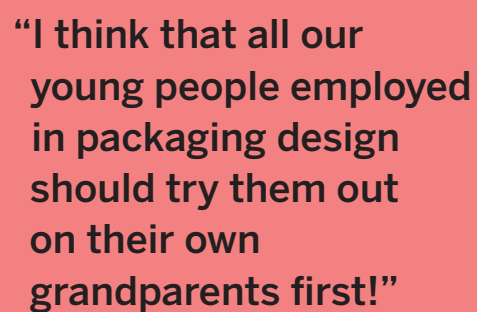
This Age Thing at The Design Age Institute and the u3a are going to take the following 4 steps:

1. We aim to launch a petition and gather at least 100,000 signatures to trigger a debate in parliament to discuss the issue of poorly designed packaging and propose the creation and enforcement of a minimum, inclusive design standard for packaging.

2. To carry out more research with design institutions and businesses to look at the impact of poorly designed packaging on the health and wellbeing of people as they age, building on the work by Levy.

3. We will identify tools and devices which are currently available to help open packaging more easily and safely and will set up an online resource to support people.

4. We are going to work with industry to help them to design better products and services that will not only assist older people but people of all ages, which is good for business and also for challenging ageist stereotypes. The ambition is to create an accreditation for businesses which they can include on their packaging to show that it is easy to use.



“I think that all our young people employed in packaging design should try them out on their own grandparents first!”

