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# TOM TOM ENGLISH



## Japan awash in weird warnings

### VOCABULARY

#### Resent =

To feel bitterness or  
indignation

#### Post-\_\_X\_\_ =

After \_\_X\_\_ e.g. post-  
war = after war

#### Nanny =

A person (usually a  
woman) employed to  
look after a child at  
home

#### Admonish =

To earnestly advise or  
urge someone to do  
something

#### Garment =

An item of clothing

### Discussion questions

1. Have you seen any warnings like this?  
What were they?
2. What do you think about the tendency to  
warn against silly or obvious risks?
3. Do you think Japan is becoming a more  
**litigious** society? Why? Why not?
4. What does the warning label on Japanese  
cigarettes say? What do you think about  
this warning? Should we remove it?  
Change it? Keep it the same?
5. Do you think there are too many  
warnings in Japan? Why? Why not?
6. Have you ever had a stupid accident?  
Would a warning have helped you?

### VOCABULARY

#### Wacky =

Funny or amusing in a  
strange way

#### Litigious =

Likely to sue

#### Proliferate =

To increase rapidly in  
number; to multiply

#### Plethora =

A large or excessive  
amount of something

“Warning: Holding iced candy in your hands for a long time will result in cold hands.”

“Warning: Toothpaste is liable to spurt. Make sure it doesn’t get into your eye.”

Seriously? Japan is awash in warnings, says Josei Seven (Feb 26). Be careful of this, steer clear of that. Harmless, but irritating. Adults **resent** being treated like children. Who can help getting annoyed when reading on an instant soup package, “Warning: Adding hot water will make this hot.”

Japan has long been known for this kind of thing. During the **post**-war U.S. Occupation its leader, General Douglas MacArthur, is said to have described Japan as “a nation of 12-year-olds.” In our own day the expression “**nanny** state” has become familiar. In train stations, on the street, in the media, via loudspeakers, billboards, handwritten signs and product labels, we are forever being **admonished**, in one form or another, to “be careful.”

And yet, Josei Seven observes, product label warnings excessive to the point of comedy originated not in Japan but in the U.S., where since 1997 there has been an “Annual **Wacky** Warning Labels Contest,” one winner of which was a warning on a clothes iron: “Do not iron **garment** while wearing it.”

To much the same degree as Japan is known as an over-protective society, the U.S. is known as a **litigious** society. People sue each other – and consumers sue product manufacturers – at the drop of a hat. If American companies are tense, they have reason to be. Josei Seven reminds us

of a suit 20-odd years ago involving a woman who spilled hot coffee on herself and sued the restaurant for damages – successfully – because there had been no warning on the paper cup.

Japanese may be less inclined than Americans to **haul** each other into court, but in 1995, a new Product Liability Law came into force here, making the manufacturer responsible for damages to the consumer if the product was defective. But what exactly does “defective” mean? Is a paper cup from which hot water can spill defective? If a woman burns her forehead with a hot hair iron, is it the iron’s fault? Better safe than sorry. And the warnings **proliferated**.

And so, sure enough, have the complaints, Josei Seven learns from the National Consumer Affairs Center of Japan. Some of them seem rather surprising. A woman in her 50s said she suffered injuries to her chin while eating a snack biscuit that was harder than she’d expected. A woman in her 80s claimed a hose attached to a kitchen sink faucet shifted suddenly when she turned on the water, causing her to fall. The hose did in fact come with a warning – that it could be dangerous to small children. It said nothing about the elderly. Hence the complaint.

What the center did about these and a **plethora** of similar claims is not mentioned. There’s no mention any of them ended up in court, but even if they didn’t, manufacturers naturally want to protect themselves. Is it possible to cover all bases, to allow for all contingencies? Probably not, but the effort proceeds apace. And so, “Warning: Be sure to remove all toothpaste from toothbrush after use.” It may get moldy. You never know.