

How to Choose a Cleanser

CHECKLIST



Editor's Note

I created this resource to help you choose effective cleansers that will remove dirt, oil and makeup without harming your skin. Believe it or not, cleanser can make or break your entire skincare routine. One that is too harsh can leave you dry and irritated; but one that is too rich can clog your pores and leave behind residue. With this checklist, you'll be able to pick the right types of cleansers for your skin, understand which products and ingredients to avoid, and use your cleansers correctly for thoroughly clean skin.

Michelle

How to Choose a Cleanser

Is it suitable for your skin?

First, determine whether the cleanser is appropriate for your specific cleansing needs and skin concerns. When in doubt, choose as gentle a formula as possible.

Choose from these common cleanser types:

Type of Cleanser	Pros and Cons	Best For
Micellar water	Removes dirt, oil and light makeup	All skin, especially sensitive
	Usually gentle on the skin	
	Doesn't leave behind residue (no rinsing required)	
	Can replace a regular face wash	
Cleansing oil or balm	Breaks up dirt, oil and waterproof makeup	Normal, dry and sensitive skin
	Gentle on the skin	

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Type of Cleanser	Pros and Cons	Best For
Cleansing oil or balm — Continued	Leaves behind residue (even after rinsing)	
	Must be fully removed with a warm, wet cloth	
Cleansing cream or milk	Removes dirt, oil and light makeup (but not thoroughly)	Normal, dry and sensitive skin
	Gentle on the skin	
	Leaves behind residue (even after rinsing)	
	Must be fully removed with a warm, wet cloth	
Cleansing lotion	Removes dirt, oil and light makeup (but may not be thorough)	All skin
	Usually gentle on the skin	

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Type of Cleanser	Pros and Cons	Best For
Cleansing lotion — Continued	May leave behind residue (even after rinsing)	
	May need to be removed with toner or a warm, wet cloth	
Cleansing gel	Removes dirt, oil and makeup	Normal, oily and acne-prone skin
	Can be drying	
	Doesn't leave behind residue (rinses clean with water)	
	May need to be preceded by another cleanser to remove makeup	
Foaming cleanser	Removes dirt, oil and makeup	Normal, oily and acne-prone skin

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Type of Cleanser	Pros and Cons	Best For
Foaming cleanser — Continued	Can be drying	
	Doesn't leave behind residue (rinses clean with water)	
	May need to be preceded by another cleanser to remove makeup	

Avoid the following cleanser types:

- **Face wipes:** Best for occasional use only, as they leave surfactants on the skin that can cause irritation. If you must use a wipe, rinse afterward with water.
- **Exfoliating cleansers:** Their small, abrasive particles can cause irritation. Use a gentle cloth or mild acid to exfoliate instead.
- **Bar soap and castille soap:** Because of their alkaline nature, they can disrupt the skin's pH balance and compromise its barrier.

Note: Although most companies do not disclose their cleansers' pH levels, you ideally want to have a low pH (less than 6.0).

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☑ Does it need to be used with a second cleanser and/or cloth?

After wearing makeup, sunscreen or silicone-based skincare products, it's best to double cleanse (clean your skin twice). The goal is to get off ALL traces of dirt, oil, makeup and cleanser residue—which a single cleanse usually can't do.

Depending on the cleanser, you might be able to simply wash twice with the same product.

However, it's usually most effective to use a makeup-removing cleanser first, and then follow up with a second cleanser that is water-based and rinses away clean. For example:

First Cleanse	Second Cleanse
Micellar water	Cleansing lotion†
Cleansing oil or balm*	Cleansing gel
Cleansing cream or milk*	Foaming cleanser
Cleansing lotion*	

*Residue must be fully removed with a warm, wet cloth. †Can be used for second cleanse if it rinses away clean.

For cleansers that leave residue, follow this method to remove it:

- Massage cleanser over skin
- Place a clean cloth under warm running water
- Wring out excess and drape the cloth over your face
- Lightly steam your skin for 10 seconds
- Use the cloth to gently wipe away the cleanser, makeup, etc.
- Rinse the cloth and repeat the steaming/wiping process up to four more times

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☑ Is it free of harsh sulfates?

Sulfates are detergents that are used to create a lather and remove dirt and sebum from the skin. However, they can strip away your skin's natural protective oils and alter its pH, leading to irritation, sensitivity, dryness and weakened barrier function.

Examine your cleanser's ingredients list (on the back of the product or its packaging) to ensure it only contains gentle cleansing agents:

Harsh	Gentle
Ammonium lauryl sulfate	Cocamidopropyl betaine
Cocamide DEA	Cocamidopropyl hydroxysultaine
Potassium hydroxide	Coco glucoside
Potassium myristate	Decyl glucoside
Sodium C14-16 olefin sulfonate	Disodium cocoamphodiacetate
Sodium cocoate	Disodium lauraminopropionate
Sodium hydroxide	Disodium laureth sulfosuccinate
Sodium laureth sulfate	Sodium cetearyl sulfate
Sodium lauryl sulfate	Sodium cocoamphoacetate
Sodium palm kernelate	Sodium cocoyl amino acids
Sodium palmate	Sodium cocoyl glutamate
Sodium tallowate	Sodium cocoyl glycinate
TEA-laureth sulfate	Sodium cocoyl isethionate
TEA-lauryl sulfate	Sodium lauroamphoacetate
	Sodium lauroyl lactylate
	Sodium lauroyl oat amino acids
	Sodium lauroyl sarcosinate
	Sodium lauryl glucose carboxylate
	Sodium myreth sulfate
	Sorbitan olivate

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Is it free of fragrance?

If possible, avoid fragrances in cleansers—they can cause irritation, dryness and even allergic reactions. Here's how to spot fragrance on labels:

Names for Fragrance
Aroma
Essential oil blend
Fragrance
Parfum
Perfume

Does it leave your skin feeling tight and dry?

Finally, test the cleanser on your skin. If your face feels tight and dry right away after using it, you may need a different (gentler) product. Note: In low humidity, you have about one minute to apply moisturizer after washing your face, before the air will start to pull moisture out of your skin. So if your skin feels tight within that first minute, it's definitely not the right cleanser.

Does it pass the cotton pad test?

Next, saturate a cotton pad with toner or micellar water and pass it over your skin. If you see dirt or makeup on the pad, your cleanser isn't doing its job. You may need a stronger cleanser, a second cleanser, or more thorough removal. If the cotton pad is clean, your cleansing routine is working!