

BEAUTY & BALANCE

THE FREE LIBRARY · GUIDE No. 03

The Clean Beauty Glossary

*The ingredients that work, the ones
to avoid, and how to read a label
like a chemist.*



A free guide from our library — yours to keep

*with warmth,
the Beauty & Balance team*

INTRODUCTION

Decoded, with *Care*.

The ingredients that work, the ones to avoid, and how to read a label like a chemist.

“Clean beauty” has become one of the most misused phrases in the industry. There is no regulatory definition. There are no enforced standards. What you are left with is a marketing claim — and the responsibility to read your own labels.

This glossary is a starting point. We have gathered the ingredients we trust, the ones we cautiously include, and the ones we have quietly removed from our own bathrooms. It is meant to be read once, and then kept as a reference — not to obsess over, but to consult.

“A label is not a sentence. It is a paragraph — read it slowly.”

PART ONE

The Trusted.

Ingredients backed by decades of research, used widely by dermatologists, and worth seeking out.

Hyaluronic Acid

A naturally-occurring molecule that holds water in the skin. Suitable for every skin type, every age.

Niacinamide (Vitamin B3)

Reduces redness, refines pores, balances oil production. One of the most universally tolerated active ingredients.

L-Ascorbic Acid

The most studied form of vitamin C. Brightens, protects, and stimulates collagen synthesis.

Retinol & Retinoids

The single most evidence-backed anti-ageing ingredient. Begin slowly — twice a week, then build.

Ceramides

Lipids that form the skin's protective barrier. Essential for sensitive, dry, or compromised skin.

Glycerin

A simple, gentle humectant that has been used in skincare for over a century. Quietly excellent.

Squalane

A stabilised form of the skin's natural sebum. Non-comedogenic, lightweight, deeply nourishing.

Peptides

Short chains of amino acids that signal the skin to produce collagen and elastin. Subtle but cumulative.

Zinc Oxide

A mineral sunscreen filter that provides broad-spectrum protection without irritation. The gold standard for sensitive skin.

Salicylic Acid (BHA)

Oil-soluble exfoliant that penetrates pores. The ingredient of choice for blemish-prone skin.

Glycolic & Lactic Acids (AHAs)

Surface-level exfoliants that brighten and smooth. Lactic is gentler; glycolic is more potent.

Centella Asiatica

A botanical extract with calming, anti-inflammatory properties. Beloved in Korean skincare for good reason.

Bakuchiol

A plant-based alternative to retinol with similar benefits and far less irritation. Excellent during pregnancy.

Vitamin E (Tocopherol)

An antioxidant that extends the stability of vitamin C and protects against environmental damage.

Panthenol (Pro-Vitamin B5)

A humectant and skin-soother. Often found in formulas for compromised or post-procedure skin.

PART TWO

The *Cautious*.

Ingredients with mixed evidence — useful for some, irritating for others.

Essential Oils

Beautiful in concept, problematic in concentration. Many — including lavender and citrus oils — can sensitise skin over time. Use in carrier oils, never directly on the face.

Fragrance / Parfum

An umbrella term that can hide dozens of unlisted compounds. The leading cause of skincare contact dermatitis. Choose fragrance-free where possible.

Alcohol Denat.

Used to give products a fast-absorbing finish. Drying for most skin types — though tolerable in trace amounts in some sunscreens.

Witch Hazel

Astringent and beloved by many, but most commercial preparations contain alcohol. Read carefully.

Coconut Oil

Excellent for hair and body. Highly comedogenic for facial skin in most people.

Lanolin

A profoundly effective moisturiser, but a common allergen for those with sensitive skin.

PART THREE

The Avoided.

Ingredients with concerning evidence, redundant function, or better alternatives readily available.

Oxybenzone

A chemical sunscreen filter linked to coral reef damage and hormone disruption. Choose mineral filters (zinc oxide, titanium dioxide) instead.

Parabens

Preservatives associated with mild estrogenic activity in some studies. Many gentler alternatives exist.

Phthalates

Often hidden under “fragrance.” Linked to hormone disruption. Avoid.

Sodium Lauryl Sulfate (SLS)

A harsh foaming agent that strips the skin barrier. Sodium laureth sulfate (SLES) is gentler but still drying for many.

Formaldehyde Releasers

Look for: DMDM hydantoin, quaternium-15, imidazolidinyl urea. Used as preservatives. Better alternatives exist.

Mineral Oil (in face products)

Not inherently harmful, but provides no nutritive value. Squalane or jojoba do everything mineral oil does, better.

PART FOUR

How to Read a Label.

Order matters.

Ingredients are listed by concentration, from highest to lowest. The first five tell you almost everything about the product.

The 1% line.

Below water, anything listed before phenoxyethanol or another preservative is at >1% concentration. Anything after is trace.

Active claims.

If a product advertises a hero ingredient, it should appear in the first five — not the last five. If it does not, the claim is largely cosmetic.

Less is often more.

A formula with 12 ingredients, well-chosen, will frequently outperform one with 47. Density of formulation is not the same as quality.

Trust the boring.

The most effective skincare is rarely the most exciting. Glycerin, niacinamide, and zinc oxide built modern dermatology. They are still the foundation.

A FINAL NOTE

On *Discernment*.

There is no perfect product. There is no perfect routine. There is only the slow education of your own skin, paired with the slow education of your own eye for a label.

Keep this glossary. Return to it when you are tempted by a beautifully-photographed jar. The bottle is not the truth. The list of ingredients is.

SHOP THE GLOSSARY

Where to *Find* the Real Thing.

Knowing the ingredients is the first step. Knowing where to find them, at any price point, is the second. Below: which drugstore products contain the gold-standard ingredients you just learned about, and how to spot the ones worth buying.

HYALURONIC ACID

Drugstore: e.l.f. Holy Hydration Face Cream, The Ordinary Hyaluronic Acid 2% + B5, CeraVe Hydrating Cleanser. Mid-tier: Neutrogena Hydro Boost. The hyaluronic in the \$80 serum is chemically identical to the hyaluronic in the \$8 one. Pay for elegant texture, not the molecule itself.

NIACINAMIDE

Drugstore: The Ordinary Niacinamide 10% + Zinc 1%, CeraVe PM Facial Moisturizing Lotion. The Ordinary's version is the one most dermatologists recommend, full stop. It is six dollars.

VITAMIN C (L-ASCORBIC ACID)

Drugstore: Maelove Glow Maker, Naturium Vitamin C Complex Serum. Look for amber or opaque glass and a concentration of 10-20%. Avoid clear-bottle vitamin C — it oxidizes.

RETINOL

Drugstore: CeraVe Resurfacing Retinol Serum, RoC Retinol Correxion. Start with the lowest concentration available (0.1%-0.3%) and use it 2-3 times per week, then build up. The expensive prescription versions are stronger but the difference plateaus quickly.

CERAMIDES

Drugstore: CeraVe (anything — the entire line is built around them), Cetaphil Restoraderm. Ceramides are unflashy and unsexy and the most underrated ingredient in beauty.

MINERAL SPF (ZINC + TITANIUM)

Drugstore: La Roche-Posay Anthelios Mineral, EltaMD UV Clear (mid-tier but worth it). Avoid white-cast options unless your skin is very fair — tinted formulas are widely available now.

SQUALANE

Drugstore: The Ordinary 100% Plant-Derived Squalane, Biossance Squalane Oil. The Ordinary's version costs eight dollars and is essentially indistinguishable from the forty-dollar version.

THE SWAP CHART

If You See *This*, Look for *That*.

When you read a label and see one of these red-list ingredients, here is what to look for instead. Same function, better formula.

Mineral oil → *Squalane (same occlusive effect, non-comedogenic)*

SLS / SLES (sodium lauryl/laureth sulfate) → *Cocamidopropyl betaine, decyl glucoside (gentler foaming)*

DMDM hydantoin / quaternium-15 → *Phenoxyethanol, ethylhexylglycerin (modern preservatives)*

Oxybenzone / octinoxate (chemical SPF) → *Zinc oxide, titanium dioxide (mineral SPF)*

“Fragrance/parfum” (undisclosed) → *Fragrance-free or naturally scented (essential oil-derived)*

Coconut oil (on the face) → *Squalane, jojoba, rosehip (non-comedogenic alternatives)*

Alcohol denat. high in the list → *Glycerin- or panthenol-based formulas*

“Parabens” (methyl-, propyl-, butyl-) → *Phenoxyethanol, sodium benzoate (paraben-free preservation)*

Print this page. Fold it. Keep it in your wallet. The next time you flip a bottle and see one of the red-list names, you have a real swap in your pocket.

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