



TEXTURE GUIDE · OBJECTS

Plant extracts without the guesswork

You will sort any ingredient list into neat groups and find the quiet line where one percent ends. You will also learn to feel what the top of a list says about slip, weight and finish before you ever open the cap.

- **Weight leads first**
The top lines set body and glide, while smaller doses appear further down.
- **Small means active**
Potent helpers often sit low on the list and still shape how skin feels.
- **One name shifts**
A single INCI name can hide many grades, blends and textures inside.

By Jocelyn Hardy · Updated Jul 28, 2026 · 10 min read

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By the end of this guide you will read a label the way you test a cream on the back of your hand, from base to finish. You will group names by role, place the one percent turn, and hold plant stories up to calmer scrutiny.

01

What INCI names hold in practice

All cosmetics sold in the United States show a standard ingredient list. INCI means International Nomenclature of Cosmetic Ingredients, a worldwide naming system issued in the International Cosmetic Ingredient Dictionary and Handbook by the Personal Care Products Council. The system dates to the 1970s and is used in the USA, China, Japan and all of the European Union, so one name can cross many shelves.

That common tongue is why botanicals read so formally. Plant ingredients use Latin binomial names with common name in parentheses, such as Butyrospermum Parkii (Shea) Butter and Avena Sativa (Oat) Kernel Oil. The Latin part fixes identity across languages, while the common name lets a shopper spot the plant. A blend built around shea or oat will use that format rather than a farm name or a lyrical extract title.

Water obeys the same rule. Water may appear as Water, Aqua or Eau on one label to allow sale across markets, and it is one ingredient not three. Makers print the synonyms side by side so a single pack can travel across regions without reprinting. Readers can regard that string as one base ingredient.

Formal names merit a slower touch. Tocopherol is vitamin E and sodium chloride is table salt, which shows that long scientific names do not mean harsh and short names do not mean gentle. A natural sound offers no safety promise, and a chemical sound offers no warning by itself. The name records what the substance is called in trade, not how skin will meet it.

02

Weight leads the list from the top

In the United States what touches your hands on the label is ruled by the Fair Packaging and Labeling Act and FDA rules at 21 CFR 701.3. Ingredients above 1 percent appear in falling order of weight, with the largest amount leading the feel. That rule shapes the upper part of the list, where formula structure lives.

Water sits near the start in most serums, cleansers and moisturizers because it forms the base medium, and seeing Water first signals a normal formula. Water carries humectants, helps extracts dissolve, and lends emulsions their fluid body. Early ingredients in skincare are usually water or aloe at 70 to 95 percent of product, with the next four ingredients typically at 3 to 5 percent. Those first five or six lines therefore speak of texture and delivery more than treatment power.

Waterless formulas such as balms and oils begin with oils or butters rather than water. With no water phase to declare, the plants that give body move to the front. A balm may open with a butter and a wax, while a facial oil may open with two or three carrier oils. The logic remains constant, because the largest share still leads.

The First Five rule misleads because the first five often construct the base cream or lotion format while effective antioxidants, retinoids and other actives can sit lower and still work. A moisturizer requires its water phase, its emollients and its emulsifier before it can hold anything else. Rating treatment strength from those structural ingredients misses their purpose, which is to carry and release the smaller doses that follow.

FROM THE EDITORS

Look to the top lines for format, not for strength. Water, humectants, emollients and emulsifiers tell whether the product is a gel, lotion, cream or oil, and how it might slip across skin.

03

Where the 1 percent turn sits

Past a certain point, order stops ranking. Ingredients at 1 percent or less may appear in any order after those present at more than 1 percent. As cosmetic chemist Perry Romanowski puts it, 1 percent line refers to the place in the list of ingredients which indicates where the concentration of ingredients is less than 1 percent.

No maker prints that turn. Readers spot it by seeking ingredients that formulators seldom use above 1 percent. Trusted signs that you have passed the 1 percent line include preservatives such as Phenoxyethanol, chelating agents such as Sodium Phytate or Disodium EDTA, gums such as Xanthan Gum, and pH adjusters such as Sodium Phosphate and Disodium Phosphate. Noticing one of these names suggests everything after it is also at 1 percent or less.

Several familiar helpers affirm the pattern. Parabens, sodium benzoate, potassium sorbate and sodium dehydroacetate are preservatives that stay at or under 1 percent. Phenoxyethanol has an EU legal cap that keeps it at or under 1 percent concentration. Xanthan Gum is a thickener usually found near 0.5 percent and seldom over 1 percent except in a viscous texture. When these occur, they work like small flags in dense texture.

Placement below the 1 percent line cannot be read as a ranking because brands may legally move claim ingredients up and preservatives down within that section. A hero extract placed just before Phenoxyethanol may still be present at a very small amount. A preservative placed near the close may be performing its usual task at its usual low level. Use the browser find function and read the neighbors rather than counting places. If Centella sits among gums, chelators and pH adjusters, read it as part of the low dose group and look for other clues about strength, such as the brand stating a tested level or describing the extraction approach.

04

How much actives ask for

Dr. Natacha Bonjout, Pharm.D., offers a useful caution for the senses: An ingredient list shows you what lives inside a product. It never shows how beautifully the product performs on skin. The same chemist adds another line to keep close: "Concentration matters. Concentration with no context tells you nearly nothing.

Context begins with dose range. Concentration only means something in context because many strong actives work under 1 percent while others ask for more, and the list hides exact percentages, grades, processing and feel. Astaxanthin does its work at clinically tested levels of only 0.035 percent even in ninth place, as in Firm plus Repair Overnight Serum. Prescription retinoids often hold 0.1 percent at most yet feel more potent than over the counter retinol which often holds a far higher percentage. Shopping guides sometimes use the 1 percent line to reject products with hero ingredients below markers, while formulators stress that low dose actives can be potent and context matters.

Other materials request more space to act. Vitamin C forms span from a fraction of a percent up to 20 percent based on whether the form is an acid, alcohol, ester or liposomal form. Niacinamide, glycolic acid and ascorbic acid often sit higher because their studied ranges run higher, though the true share never shows on a cosmetic label. Higher is seldom better, because irritation, stability and pH limits sculpt the usable range. A strong acid at a high share may want low pH and careful packaging, while a soft ester at a lower share may suit daily wear.

Form, formula, pH, packaging and use pattern all shift what a percentage means. There is no single effective dose for every extract, oil or isolate because dose rests on those factors. A plant isolate that soothes redness in one creamy emulsion may do little in a rinse off cleanser with brief contact time. For that reason, view the list as a map of presence, then ask the brand for the tested level, the form used, and the usage directions that complete the picture.

05

Extracts, oils, isolates and quiet additions

One INCI name can contain more than one reality. The same INCI name can mean different grades, like food grade versus cosmetic Xanthan Gum Clear or Soft, different Cetearyl Alcohol ratios of 30:70, 50:50 and 70:30, and different Dimethicone chain lengths. Grade shapes clarity, slip, viscosity and skin feel, yet none of that detail appears in the name. Two creams can list the same thickener and feel nothing alike.

Extracts bring their liquid base

A botanical extract is seldom the plant alone. Leaves, roots or flowers are steeped in water, glycerin, oil or alcohol, then filtered and at times preserved. The INCI line may print only the plant name, while the solvent and preservative ride inside that extract with no separate reveal. An oat or centella extract can therefore vary in strength and character depending on harvest, plant part, solvent ratio and storage. The name proves identity, never intensity.

Oils, butters and single molecules feel apart

A pressed oil or butter delivers its full lipid field, including triglycerides and small amounts of unsaponifiables that shape scent and texture. An isolate lifts one molecule from that field for a narrower task. Both approaches have a place, and neither is superior by definition. The list reveals which path the formulator selected, while placement reveals whether it builds the formula or supports it in a smaller amount.

Blends and scent rules

Trade names must never stand alone and must split into INCI parts, for example Matrixyl 3000 and preservative blend Euxyl PE 9010 shown as Phenoxyethanol, Ethylhexylglycerin. Shoppers may need to look up the grouped INCI names to spot a peptide blend or a preservative system. Regional rules add another layer. The Skin1004 Madagascar Centella Ampoule lists only Centella Asiatica Extract in Korea while the USA label adds Water, Glycerin, Cellulose, 1,2 Hexanediol and other parts. The formula in the bottle may feel similar, while disclosure rules shift what shows on paper. South Korean ordering rules are called different but exact regulations are not confirmed, so cross market comparisons want care.

Scent follows its own custom. Fragrance or Parfum parts can cluster with no full reveal as trade secrets, while certain fragrance allergens like Linalool or Citronellol must show separately. A plant scent from essential oils will usually surface through those allergen names near the close of the list. Sensitive readers can treat those separate allergen listings as a useful signal, even when the full perfume blend stays closed.

FROM THE EDITORS

Terms such as clean, natural and dermatologist tested carry no regulatory meaning. They define neither what they mean nor what thresholds they require, so regard them as brand language and return to the INCI list for firmer ground.

06

What the list cannot show and label exceptions

Order reveals relative position not exact formula. The same INCI list can cover formulas with wildly different percentages, textures and performance, so the list is disclosure never a blueprint for copying or judging efficacy. One lotion may feel light and one may feel rich while sharing most names in a close sequence. Processing, heating and cooling times, grade choices and ingredient interplay shape the finish with no trace on the package.

The gaps remain broad. The list alone gives no exact percentages for most ingredients, nor grade, molecular weight, processing method or stability data. They settle no single plant dose, because dose moves with chemistry and use. For questions about irritation, allergy, pregnancy, or a lasting skin condition, see a pharmacist, dermatologist or other qualified professional rather than label reading alone.

Some products take separate labeling paths. US OTC products like sunscreens or benzoyl peroxide acne treatments put active ingredients with exact amounts first and then list inactive ingredients. That active drug panel feels like a true percentage you can trust, unlike the softer cosmetic part that follows. Australian sunscreens only need to show UV filters and preservatives, never the full ingredient list. When shopping across borders, expect the shape of the label to shift even if the cream inside feels familiar.

07

The checklist

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- ☐ View INCI names as identity, not alarm
 - ☐ Link Latin binomials with familiar plant names
 - ☐ Count Water, Aqua, Eau as a single base
 - ☐ Read the top five for body and format
 - ☐ Anticipate water first in lotions, oils first in balms
 - ☐ See Phenoxyethanol as likely below one percent
 - ☐ See Xanthan Gum and chelators as turn markers
 - ☐ Set hero plant beside its low dose neighbors
 - ☐ Recall that low dose helpers may still shape feel
 - ☐ Request form and tested level for the key active
 - ☐ Scan allergen names when scent feels sensitive
 - ☐ Leave clean and natural aside as open phrases
 - ☐ Find the OTC active panel on sunscreens and acne care
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08

Sources and further reading

- INKEEDecoder - Decode your skincare ingredients · inkeedecoder.com
- How to Read an INCI List (Skincare Ingredients Explained) · theinkeylist.com
- Skincare Ingredient Lists: What Product Labels Won't Tell You · blog.reneerouleau.com
- The INCI rules: why you can't judge a skincare product by its ingredient list alone · medium.com
- How to Read an INCI List: Decoding Your Skincare · bonjoutbeauty.com
- The 1% Line Skincare Ingredients Rule — PBL Magazine · pblmagazine.co.uk

For information only, not medical advice. Patch test anything new, and see a dermatologist about a reaction that lasts, spreads or stings.



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Jocelyn looks after the brands Second Skin works with and makes sure every sponsored page says so. She spent five years in packaging development for a Brooklyn beauty studio, which is how she knows what a heavy glass jar costs to ship.
