

bronzer

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Bronzer

Warm-toned colour applied to add the appearance of sun. Bronzer is often confused with [Contour](#) and the two do genuinely different things: **bronzer adds warmth, contour adds shadow**. Warmth is orange-brown; shadow is grey-brown. Using one for the other is the most common visible error in this section.

The difference, stated plainly

	Bronzer	Contour
Undertone	Warm — golden, orange, red-brown	Cool — grey, taupe, ashy
What it simulates	Sun on skin	A shadow
Where it goes	Where the sun hits — forehead, cheekbones, nose bridge, jaw	Where shadows fall — under the cheekbone, temples, jawline
Finish	Matte or luminous	Almost always matte
Edge	Diffused, no defined line	Defined then blended, following bone

A warm bronzer used under the cheekbone produces an orange stripe rather than a hollow, because a shadow is not orange.

The formats

Powder is the default and the easiest to control. Cream and liquid bronzers melt into skin for a more natural, skin-like result and demand a lighter hand. Bronzing drops are concentrated liquid that can be mixed into moisturiser or foundation for an overall warmth.

Shimmer versus matte is the other decision. Matte bronzers read as tan; shimmering ones read as sheen and, over any surface texture, emphasise it. Matte on the face, shimmer reserved for shoulders and collarbones, is the safe default.

Choosing a shade

The usual advice is one or two shades deeper than the skin. The more useful version: **choose by undertone and depth, and test in daylight**. Too orange reads muddy; too grey reads dirty; too dark reads as a mask with an unbronzed neck below it.

Deep skin tones are not exempt from this category and are frequently ignored by it — bronzer on deep skin should be a rich, warm, red or golden brown that adds luminosity, not a lighter dust that goes grey.

Bronzer is not sun protection, and not a tan

Two things worth saying explicitly:

- **It washes off.** It confers no UV protection whatsoever. A bronzed face is exactly as burnable as an unbronzed one, and anyone using bronzer instead of sun exposure has made the right trade — see [Self-Tanner](#) for the developed version, and [Suntan Oil](#) for the product that actively increases risk.
- **It is applied to the face, not the whole body**, so it needs blending down the neck or it produces the mask line the category is mocked for.

Where it sits in the rules

Cosmetic in the US — FDA primary category (08), makeup preparations (not eye). Colour additives must be approved for the intended use and certified colours must come from **FDA-certified batches**. The pigments involved — iron oxides, mica, titanium dioxide, sometimes carmine — are conventional.

Anything sold as a "**bronzer**" that **develops colour over hours** is a different product under the rules: it contains dihydroxyacetone and belongs to sunless tanning, where DHA is an approved colour additive for **external application only**, excluding the eye area, lips and mucous membranes. See [Self-Tanner](#).

Carmine (CI 75470) must be declared by name in the US.

Shelf life

Powder: **18–24 months** after opening; the practical limit is the glaze that forms as a brush returns sebum to the pan. Cream and liquid: **12 months**. Bronzers live in handbags and travel, which means heat cycling — a cream bronzer that has melted and re-set is usually still usable but no longer applies evenly.

Related

- [Makeup](#) — the shelf this sits on, and the rest of it.
- [Cosmetics](#) — what the label is legally allowed to say, and the full catalogue.
- The rest of *Colour and contour* — [Blush](#) · [Contour](#) · [Highlighter](#) · [Face Paint](#) · [Body Paint](#) · [Leg Makeup](#).
- Regulatory statements here follow the FDA and EU sources listed on [Cosmetics](#), read 16 August 2026.