face powder

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Face Powder

Finely milled solids applied to the face to absorb oil, reduce shine and even the surface. Face powder is the oldest colour cosmetic still in continuous use — the Egyptians, the Romans, the Georgians and the Edwardians all had a version — and the history is also a catalogue of the worst ingredient decisions in cosmetics.

What it is now

Class	Doing what	Names on the label
Bulking / slip	The body of the powder	Talc, mica, sericite, silica, starch (rice, corn, tapioca)
Absorbent	Takes up sebum	Silica, kaolin, starch, nylon-12, PMMA
Pigment	Colour, if tinted	Titanium dioxide, iron oxides
Binder	Holds a pressed cake together	Esters, dimethicone, magnesium stearate
Preservative	Low water activity, so little needed	Phenoxyethanol, sometimes none

Pressed powders are the same materials compacted with a binder. Loose powders skip the binder and are

finer, lighter and messier.

Types and their jobs

- **Tinted pressed powder** — light coverage plus oil control; the compact in a bag.
- **Setting powder** — see Setting Powder. Usually translucent, applied over liquid makeup to lock it.
- **Finishing powder** — very fine, often with light-diffusing spheres, applied last for a soft-focus surface rather than for coverage.
- **Mineral powder foundation** — higher pigment load, buffed on as a foundation substitute; usually titanium dioxide-heavy, which brings flashback.
- **Blotting powder** — pure absorbent for touch-ups.

The talc question

Talc is an excellent cosmetic powder — soft, slippery, cheap, chemically inert — and it is mineralogically associated with asbestos in some deposits, so contamination is a real and recurring finding rather than a theoretical one. The regulatory position as of this writing:

- **MoCRA directed FDA to establish standardised testing methods for asbestos in talc-containing cosmetic products.** A proposed rule issued in **December 2024** and was **withdrawn in November 2025**, leaving the requirement unfinalised.
- Talc itself is not prohibited in the US or the EU. Asbestos is, and an asbestos-contaminated cosmetic is **adulterated** under FD&C Act sec. 601.
- Litigation over talc-containing body powders has been extensive and has changed what major manufacturers sell.

Talc-free powders using mica, sericite, silica and starches are widely available and perform well. That is a reasonable preference to hold; it is not a claim that all talc products are contaminated.

Historical note, because it is instructive

Face powder is the category with the worst historical record of any cosmetic. **Venetian ceruse** — white lead — was the prestige face powder of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries and caused lead poisoning, skin destruction and death. **Mercury** compounds followed. Both were used for centuries by people who had every reason to trust the market they bought from, which is a useful thing to hold in mind when reading modern reassurance about any ingredient.

FDA's December 2022 final guidance recommends a maximum of **10 ppm lead** in externally applied cosmetics, including face powder — a recommendation rather than a regulation, and the number industry works to.

Applying it

Less than you think, on the areas that actually get oily. **Press and roll**, do not sweep — sweeping disturbs the makeup underneath. Over-powdering is what makes makeup look flat and settle into texture; on dry or mature skin, powder only the T-zone and leave the rest.

Where it sits in the rules

Cosmetic — FDA primary category (08), makeup preparations (not eye), or (03) for anything used on the eye area, where only eye-approved colour additives may be used. Certified colours must come from **FDA-certified batches**.

Loose powders raise an **inhalation** question that is genuine — fine respirable particles around the face — and is the reason applying loose powder with a heavy hand in an enclosed space is worth avoiding, particularly around infants.

Shelf life

Very low water activity, so microbial growth is slow and powders keep well — **18–24 months** after opening for a loose powder, similar for a pressed one. The practical failure is the **brush or puff**, which carries sebum and skin flora back into the pan and produces the hard glazed film on an old compact. Wash puffs, wash brushes, and scrape the film off a pressed powder that has hardened.

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 *Face* — Face Primer · Foundation · BB Cream · CC Cream · Tinted Moisturiser · Concealer · Colour Corrector · Setting Powder · Setting Spray.
- Body Powder · Baby Powder — the same talc question, higher stakes.
- Regulatory statements here follow the FDA and EU sources listed on Cosmetics, read 16 August 2026.