

lipstick

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Lipstick

Pigment in a wax and oil base, cast into a bullet. Lipstick is the most culturally loaded product in the catalogue, the most regulated by colour, and — because it is partly eaten — the one where ingredient limits are drawn most carefully.

What is in it

Class	Doing what	Names
Wax	The bullet, and the structure	Carnauba, candelilla, beeswax, ozokerite, microcrystalline
Oil / emollient	Glide, gloss, and the vehicle for the colour	Castor oil (the classic), esters, lanolin, shea
Pigment	The colour	Iron oxides, titanium dioxide, certified lakes , carmine
Filler	Opacity and finish	Silica, mica, kaolin
Antioxidant	Delays rancidity	Tocopherol, BHT

Castor oil is the defining ingredient of a traditional lipstick. Its ricinoleic acid content makes it unusually good at wetting and dispersing pigment, and it gives the characteristic gloss. It is also, for a small number of people, an irritant.

Finishes

- **Matte** — high pigment, low oil, more filler. Longest wear, most drying, most unforgiving of dry or textured lips.
- **Satin / cream** — the middle, and the most comfortable.
- **Sheer / balm** — low pigment, high emollient, short wear.
- **Metallic and frost** — pearl pigments; emphasises texture.
- **Long-wear / transfer-proof** — see [Liquid Lipstick](#), which is a different chemistry.

Colour additives, and why the lip list is the strictest

Lip products face the tightest colour rules of any cosmetic because the product is **ingested in small quantities**. In the US, an additive may be used only where FDA has approved it **for that specific use**, and lip use requires the additive to be safe on that basis.

That produces genuinely different palettes across the face. **Chromium oxide greens and ultramarines are permitted for eye-area and external use but not in lip products.** Conversely, several certified organic lakes available for lips are not approved for the eye area. **Certified colours must come from FDA-certified batches** — the one part of US cosmetic law with real premarket control.

Carmines (CI 75470) — cochineal-derived red — is the backbone of the red lipstick palette. FDA requires it to be **declared by name** because of documented hypersensitivity, and it is the ingredient that makes most red lipstick non-vegan.

Lead, addressed properly

The claim that lipstick "contains lead" recirculates every few years. What is true: lead occurs as a **trace contaminant** of mineral pigments, at parts per million, not as an ingredient. FDA has surveyed marketed lipsticks repeatedly and, in **December 2022**, issued **final guidance recommending a maximum of 10 ppm lead** in cosmetic lip products and externally applied cosmetics.

It is guidance rather than a binding regulation, and FDA's surveys found the great majority of products already well below it. What is not true is that lipstick is a significant lead exposure. What is worth avoiding is unregulated imported product with no ingredient list — which is where the genuinely alarming test results come from, here as with [Kohl and Kajal](#).

Where it sits in the rules

Cosmetic in the US — FDA primary category (08), makeup preparations (not eye), with the lip colour additive rules above. A lipstick carrying an **SPF** is **also an OTC drug**, with a Drug Facts panel and an expiration date. One claiming to treat cold sores is a drug regardless of what it contains.

In the EU, permitted colorants come from the **Annex IV** closed positive list — 153 entries — and the prohibited list at Annex II runs to 1,766 substances.

Shelf life

Two years unopened, 12–18 months after opening. The failure modes are **rancidity** of the oils — a crayon-like or putty smell — and sweating, where oil separates and beads on the surface after heat exposure. Neither is dangerous immediately, but both mean the formula has changed.

Do not share lipstick, and discard any bullet used during a cold sore outbreak; herpes simplex transfers on a lipstick without difficulty. Wiping the bullet with alcohol between uses is a real hygiene measure and is what makeup artists do.

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 *Lips* — [Liquid Lipstick](#) · [Lip Gloss](#) · [Lip Liner](#) · [Lip Stain](#) · [Lip Oil](#) · [Lip Plumper](#).
- [Lip Balm](#) — the uncoloured half of the same surface.
- Regulatory statements here follow the FDA and EU sources listed on [Cosmetics](#), read 16 August 2026.