

# cleansing oil

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## Cleansing Oil

An oil that rinses. Cleansing oil dissolves the things water cannot touch — sunscreen filters, long-wear pigment, sebum — and then, on contact with water, turns milky and washes off instead of sitting there. That second half is the whole trick, and it is done by an emulsifier, not by the oil.

### What it is

A blend of one or more liquid oils or esters carrying a **surfactant that works from the oil phase**. Applied to dry skin, the oil phase does the dissolving: like dissolves like, so an oil-soluble sunscreen filter or a wax-based mascara comes away readily. Add water and massage, and the emulsifier flips the mixture into an oil-in-water emulsion — the visible milky turn — which rinses cleanly.

Take the emulsifier out and you have a facial oil that has to be wiped away with a cloth. That is a legitimate method, but it is not a cleansing oil.

### What is in it

| Class               | Doing what                       | Names on the label                                                                            |
|---------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Carrier oil / ester | Dissolves oil-bound soil         | Caprylic/capric triglyceride, ethylhexyl palmitate, mineral oil, sunflower, jojoba, rice bran |
| Emulsifier          | Makes it rinse                   | PEG-20 glyceryl triisostearate, polysorbate 80, sorbeth-30 tetraoleate                        |
| Solvent booster     | Cuts heavy film formers          | Isopropyl myristate, isododecane                                                              |
| Antioxidant         | Keeps the oils from going rancid | Tocopherol, BHT, rosemary extract                                                             |

Most cleansing oils are anhydrous — no water, so no preservative needed. Check the list: if water appears, a preservative should too.

## Using it

1. **Dry hands, dry face.** Water on the skin first blocks the oil from reaching the soil, and water on the hands starts the emulsification early.
2. Massage for 30–60 seconds. Sunscreen in particular needs the time.
3. **Add water gradually and keep massaging** until it turns white. Skipping this step is why people report an oily film — the oil was rinsed, not emulsified.
4. Rinse, then follow with a water-based cleanser if wearing heavy makeup or high SPF. This is the "double cleanse", and its only real justification is that step one and step two remove different things.

## The comedogenicity question

The comedogenic ratings circulating for individual oils come from a 1970s rabbit-ear assay and do not transfer cleanly to human facial skin, let alone to a product that is on the face for one minute and then removed. The practical rule is narrower and better supported: **oleic-acid-heavy oils** — coconut, and to a lesser extent olive — are the ones most often reported to trigger congestion, and *Malassezia*-driven folliculitis is aggravated by mid-chain fatty acids and esters, which is why some people do better on squalane or mineral oil than on a botanical blend.

## Where it sits in the rules

A **cosmetic only** in the US, filed under FDA primary category (14) skin care preparations. No drug claims, no monograph, no premarket approval. In the EU it is notified through the CPNP like any other cosmetic product, and any fragrance allergens present above the threshold must be named in the ingredient list rather than hidden inside "parfum".

Mineral oil is worth naming plainly because the internet is confident about it and wrong: cosmetic-grade white mineral oil is a highly refined, non-comedogenic, extremely well-tolerated cleansing solvent, and is permitted in both the US and the EU. The EU restricts *untreated and mildly treated* mineral oils as carcinogens under Annex II; cosmetic grades are not those.

## Shelf life

Anhydrous, so the failure mode is **rancidity**, not microbial growth. Unsaturated botanical oils oxidise fastest — expect 6–12 months once opened for a sunflower- or rosehip-heavy blend, longer for esters and mineral

oil. A sharp, crayon-like or metallic smell is the signal to bin it.

## Related

- [Skincare](#) — 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 *Cleansing* — [Facial Cleanser](#) · [Cleansing Balm](#) · [Cleansing Milk](#) · [Micellar Water](#) · [Cold Cream](#) · [Facial Cleansing Wipes](#).
- [Facial Oil](#) — the same oils, left on instead of rinsed off.
- [mineral oil](#) — the ingredient, and the argument about it.
- Regulatory statements here follow the FDA and EU sources listed on [Cosmetics](#), read 16 August 2026.