

aloe vera gel

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Aloe Vera Gel

The clear mucilaginous gel from the inner leaf of *Aloe barbadensis*, used on sunburn, minor burns and irritated skin. It is one of the very few traditional remedies in this catalogue with a plausible mechanism and reasonable supporting evidence — and one of the most adulterated products on the shelf.

What it is and what it does

The inner leaf gel is around **99% water**, with polysaccharides — chiefly **acemannan** — plus amino acids, enzymes, sterols and salicylates.

The effects that hold up:

- **Cooling.** Evaporation from a high-water gel cools the skin, and on a sunburn that is most of the immediate relief.
- **Hydration and film-forming.** The polysaccharides hold water at the surface and form a light protective film.
- **Anti-inflammatory activity**, attributed to the sterols and salicylates, with reasonable supporting evidence for reduced erythema.

- **Some evidence for accelerated healing** of superficial and partial-thickness burns, from a body of small trials that is suggestive rather than conclusive.

What it is not is a treatment for the underlying damage. **Sunburn is a DNA-damage event and nothing applied afterwards undoes it** — see [After-Sun Lotion](#).

Read the ingredient list

This is the practical heart of the page. Products sold as "aloe vera gel" vary enormously, and independent testing has repeatedly found bottles containing **little or no detectable aloe**.

What to look for:

- **Aloe first on the list**, as *Aloe barbadensis* leaf juice — not water first with aloe near the preservatives.
- **No added colour**. Aloe gel is naturally clear to pale yellow-brown. **The bright green ones are dyed**, and green dye on a sunburn adds nothing.
- **Minimal fragrance and alcohol**. Alcohol-containing gels sting and dry, which is the opposite of the point.
- **A thickener is normal** — carrageenan, xanthan gum — because pure aloe juice is watery. Some products are largely thickener with a trace of aloe.

The latex layer, and why it matters

Between the leaf's rind and the inner gel is a bitter yellow **latex** containing **anthraquinones** — **aloin and its relatives** — which are potent stimulant laxatives. Properly processed cosmetic aloe is decolourised to remove them.

Two consequences:

- **Oral aloe latex was removed from US OTC laxative products** by FDA for lack of demonstrated safety and effectiveness data.
- **Cutting a leaf at home** produces gel contaminated with latex unless the leaf is stood upright to drain and the gel is carefully separated. Home-cut aloe also carries no preservative and spoils within days.

Using it

Cool the skin first, then apply generously and often. **Refrigerating it** is worth doing — much of the relief is temperature. Reapply as it dries; a dried aloe film flakes and does nothing.

Not on blistered or broken skin without medical advice, and not on a burn that is extensive, blistering, or accompanied by fever, chills or dizziness — those need a doctor.

Aloe is in the lily family; **contact allergy is uncommon but real**, and anyone with a lily or garlic-family allergy should patch test.

Where it sits in the rules

Cosmetic in the US — FDA primary category **(15) suntan preparations**, overlapping with (14) skin care — for a gel making soothing and moisturising claims. **No premarket approval**.

A claim to **treat burns or wounds** would be a drug claim, and **aloe is not an approved active in the OTC skin protectant monograph** — so a product claiming to heal is making an unapproved drug claim.

"Soothes and cools sun-exposed skin" is cosmetic.

In the EU, preservatives come from the **Annex V closed positive list** of 60 entries, and **Annex II** prohibits 1,766 substances. The **Common Criteria** require cosmetic claims to be supported by verifiable evidence.

Shelf life

6–12 months after opening. A 99%-water product is a demanding preservation case, and it is often stored badly — in a beach bag, in the sun.

Discard at cloudiness, separation, a sour smell or any colour change. **Fresh home-cut aloe keeps a few days refrigerated and no longer**, and it has no preservative system at all.

Related

- [Sun and Tanning](#) — 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 *After sun* — [After-Sun Lotion](#).
- [Barrier Cream](#) — where the skin protectant monograph is dealt with in full.
- Regulatory statements here follow the FDA and EU sources listed on [Cosmetics](#), read 16 August 2026.