

gradual tanning lotion

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Gradual Tanning Lotion

A body moisturiser containing a low concentration of **dihydroxyacetone**, used daily to build colour slowly. Also sold as a moisturising tan or a tan-extending lotion. It is the most forgiving product in sunless tanning and the one most likely to be used consistently.

Why low and slow works

Standard self-tanners carry DHA at roughly **5–10%**, developing a full result in one application. A gradual lotion carries **1–3%**, and that difference changes the whole experience:

- **Mistakes are invisible.** A streak at 2% DHA is barely perceptible, where the same streak at 8% is obvious for a week. This is the entire appeal.
- **The depth is controllable.** Stop when it is right; keep going for more.
- **No development wait, no colour guide, no shower afterwards.** It is a body lotion.
- **It maintains an existing tan** rather than requiring a full reapplication as one fades.
- **It is the safest starting point** for anyone who has never self-tanned.

The chemistry is unchanged: **DHA reacts with amino acids in the keratin of the stratum corneum** in a

Maillard reaction, producing brown melanoidins. See [Self-Tanner](#).

Using it

- **Daily, or every other day, until the depth is right**, then two or three times a week to maintain.
- **Onto clean, dry skin**, like any lotion.
- **Wash your hands afterwards** — even at low concentration, palms accumulate.
- **Lighter on knees, elbows, ankles and knuckles**, which absorb more.
- **Exfoliate once a week** to keep the fade even.
- **Down the neck**, or a jaw line develops.

Because it builds, **the failure mode is different from a standard self-tan**: instead of a bad result in one go, an inconsistent routine produces a patchy gradient. Regularity is what makes it work.

What it does not do

It is not sun protection. A DHA tan has an SPF of roughly 3 at most. Anyone using a gradual tan through a summer still needs sunscreen — see [Sunscreen Lotion](#).

It is also **slow**: a noticeable tan takes three to five days of daily use, which is the trade for the forgiveness.

Where it sits in the rules

Cosmetic in the US — FDA primary category **(15) suntan preparations**, overlapping with (14) skin care — and **DHA is regulated as a colour additive**, approved for **external application only** and explicitly **not approved for the area of the eye, the lips or mucous membranes**.

A product with **no sunscreen** and a suntanning position carries the **21 CFR 740.19 warning** that it does not protect against sunburn. If it carries an **SPF** it is **also an OTC drug** under the sunscreen monograph, with a Drug Facts panel and an expiration date — and combined SPF-and-gradual-tan products do exist.

In the EU, DHA is permitted in cosmetics with SCCS-assessed conditions of use, and preservatives come from the **Annex V closed positive list** of 60 entries.

Shelf life

Six to twelve months after opening. **DHA degrades** in heat and at the wrong pH, giving a weaker and more orange result — and because a gradual lotion is used over months, the DHA may be doing measurably less at the end of a bottle than at the start.

Store cool and dark. A lotion that has darkened noticeably, separated, or developed a strong caramel-like off smell has degraded. Do not carry a half-used bottle over from one summer to the next.

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 *Sunless* — [Self-Tanner](#) · [Self-Tanning Mousse](#) · [Self-Tanning Drops](#) · [Tanning Water](#) · [Spray](#)

[Tan Solution](#) · [Tan Remover](#).

- [Body Lotion](#) — the base this is built on.
- Regulatory statements here follow the FDA and EU sources listed on [Cosmetics](#), read 16 August 2026.