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## Healthy Beauty

### The Lowdown on Mineral Makeup

#### How mineral makeup compares to traditional makeup.

By Shelley Levitt  
WebMD Feature

Reviewed by [Laura J. Martin, MD](#)

Two of Hollywood's top makeup artists recently took a break from curling lashes and lining lips to offer WebMD their very different views of mineral makeup:

"I love it," says Kerry Herta, who earned a 2011 Emmy nomination for her work on the daytime soap *All My Children*. "I use a mineral foundation myself. It's so natural looking it's like a second skin, and on hot humid summer days it wears better than traditional liquid makeup."

"I'm not a big fan," says Tasha Reiko Brown, a regular on the Style Network's *How Do I Look*, who has won raves for the makeup she does on singer Florence Welch of the group Florence and the Machine. "I find it collects in fine lines and pores and accentuates dry flaky areas, while it catches in slick spots. And if you're a woman of color, it can be very difficult to find a shade that's a good match for your skin."

Women, of course, often disagree about the merits of makeup products. But the debate over mineral makeup is especially fierce, going beyond whether it offers a flawless glow or a cakey finish into questions of health and safety. Companies boast that their mineral makeup confers skin care benefits, while detractors raise alarms that the finely ground particles may be risky.

One thing is certain: Women are buying mineral makeup in greater numbers than ever. According to the market research group NPD, sales of mineral makeup from prestige brands were \$195 million last year, or 6% of the cosmetics sold in the U.S. And that hefty figure doesn't include mass drugstore lines such as Revlon, L'Oreal, and Neutrogena.

#### Mineral Makeup: Hype, Reality

Bare Escentuals started what it dubbed "the mineral revolution" when it launched its loose powder foundations in the mid 70s. Competing brands soon followed, all offering the claim that mineral makeup, made from crushed pure minerals, was more "natural" than conventional makeup.

Cosmetic chemists don't quite see a revolution. "I think mineral makeup is marketing hype," says Ni'Kita Wilson, a cosmetic chemist at Englewood Lab in New Jersey. Perry Romanowski, author of *Can You Get Hooked on Lip Balm? Top Cosmetic Scientists Answer Your Questions About the Lotions, Potions and Other Beauty Products You Use Every Day*, agrees. "All makeup is mineral makeup," he says. "You'll find the same mineral ingredients -- titanium dioxide, zinc oxide, mica and iron oxides -- in conventional products."

Contrary to what advertisements may suggest, those ingredients aren't simply mined, pulverized, and poured into compacts. "I'd like someone to show me a zinc oxide mine," Wilson says. "It doesn't exist. Zinc oxide is synthesized in the lab."

And though titanium dioxide, another mineral makeup mainstay, may start out with natural titanium, it undergoes an extraction and purification process in the lab, too. That's a good thing. "There isn't any natural source of titanium that's pure enough to be used in cosmetics," Romanowski says. "It's all contaminated with things like mercury and lead."

#### What's Not in Mineral Makeup

What makes mineral makeup different from traditional makeup isn't the ingredients it contains, but what's left out. That list, for many leading brands, includes preservatives, parabens, mineral oil, chemical dyes, and fragrance. These are all possible causes of irritation, one reason many dermatologists recommend mineral makeup.

"I'm very bullish on mineral makeup," says New York dermatologist Neal Schultz, MD. "It's much less likely to cause a reaction

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in women with sensitive skin. And because it doesn't contain oil, it won't aggravate acne-prone skin."

Chicago dermatologist Brooke Jackson, MD, who uses mineral makeup herself, recommends it to patients with rosacea and eczema. She also suggests it to a highly frustrated group of women. "Women in their 30s and 40s will come in and say they have bathroom counters filled with products that have caused reactions because of one ingredient or another," Jackson says. "When they try mineral products, many are finally able to wear makeup for the first time in their lives."

### Skin Care Benefits

Mineral makeup won't take the place of your moisturizer, acne cream, or anti-aging serum potions, but it does offer some skin care benefits.

Titanium dioxide and zinc oxide are both physical sun blocks, so a uniform application of mineral makeup will provide some sun protection. "It's sufficient for those days when you're just running a few errands outside," Jackson says, "but if you're going to be spending hours outdoors on a sunny day, choose a sunscreen with an SPF 45."

What's more, Wilson says, zinc oxide is FDA-approved as a skin protectant. "It has some anti-inflammatory properties, so you'll see it in products like diaper-rash ointment," she says. "Since mineral makeup contains a higher percentage of zinc oxide than traditional makeup, it can be useful in calming irritated skin."

### Possible Risks

Just as the benefits of mineral makeup have been exaggerated, so have the potential dangers. One concern is that mineral makeup is micronized into ultra-small particles called nanoparticles that can penetrate the skin's barrier and trigger potentially harmful reactions.

Romanowski says there's no reason to fret. "If the particles were actually the size of nanoparticles they'd be useless in makeup," he says, "because they'd become transparent and wouldn't offer any coverage."

Some media reports have advised women to scan labels for bismuth oxychloride, the ingredient that gives makeup its pearly finish. It's been said to cause skin irritation and acne flare-ups, leading some mineral makeup companies to eliminate it from their formulas.

Jackson says that only a very small minority of people with highly sensitive skin will find themselves irritated by the ingredient. "These are women who react to so many ingredients that they'll probably want to have their dermatologist perform skin patch tests to identify what might possibly cause a reaction," she says. "For the vast majority of women, bismuth oxychloride is perfectly safe."

### Blurred Line

Mineral makeup has gone far beyond its modest beginnings as a loose powder foundation. Today, you can find blush, bronzer, eye shadow, lipstick, and even liquid foundations presented as mineral products.

As these products have proliferated, a funny thing has happened. Cosmetics companies have added back the ingredients they omitted when they first introduced mineral makeup. After reading the list of ingredients -- a dozen in all -- of a so-called "mineral eye shadow" from a drugstore brand, Wilson laughs, "if you hadn't told me that was the ingredients list of a mineral product, I would have said it was just your run-of-the-mill eye shadow."

As for so-called liquid mineral foundations, Wilson says it's impossible to create a liquid product with a pared-down ingredients list. Because microbes thrive in water, a liquid formulation must include some kind of preservative, she says. Without it, contaminated products can lead to skin infections.

The bottom line? If you have sensitive skin, you might want to give a loose mineral powder foundation a try. Look for products with the shortest ingredients list. "The longer the list of ingredients," says Jackson, "the bigger the opportunity to get yourself in trouble."

For everyone else, mineral makeup will do no harm and, with some practice of the "tap, swirl, and buff" application method, you might find yourself enjoying its camouflaging abilities.

Just keep your expectations in check. "No one product, including mineral foundation, is

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going to correct problems like large pores and uneven pigmentation,” Herta says. “To address those concerns you need primer, concealer, and the right skin care regimen.”

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#### SOURCES:

Kerry Herta, makeup artist, Los Angeles.

Tasha Reiko Brown, makeup artist, Los Angeles.

Ni'Kita Wilson, cosmetic chemist, vice president of research and innovation, Englewood Lab, Englewood, N.J.

Perry Romanowski, cosmetic chemist; author, *Can You Get Hooked on Lip Balm? Top Cosmetic Scientists Answer Your Questions About the Lotions, Potions and Other Beauty Products You Use Every Day* and *Beginning Cosmetic Chemistry 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*.

Neal Schultz, MD, dermatologist, assistant clinical professor, Mount Sinai Medical Center, New York.

Brooke Jackson, MD, dermatologist; clinical assistant professor, Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, Chicago.

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