

# Why Face Wash Is the Fastest Growing Skin-Care Category

[Jolene Edgar](#)

When smartphones have a nightly purification ritual — PhoneSoap and charge (it’s a whole thing) — one has to wonder: Has our collective cleansing obsession grown certifiable? “There’s a new level of mania around face washes and cleansing rituals,” says Laurel Geraghty, a dermatologist in Medford, Oregon. Maybe you [hop on Reddit](#) for a simple product recommendation, only to emerge hours (days?) later with a running list of acne-wash [pH levels](#). Or you go for a casual scroll through Instagram, turning up sparkling bottles flanked by mint, echinacea — and oh! The raves! If a cleanser could blush...

This fervor signals a 180 in our attitudes and appetites. Just three years ago, [Glossier founder Emily Weiss created a cleanser](#) because, she says, “no one on the team had a holy grail cleanser that they swore by.” Now [Glossier’s Milky Jelly Cleanser](#) is widely worshipped and has its own hashtag. “Washing your face was once a rote chore — now it’s a step worthy of its own focus,” says Geraghty. “It’s part of a new stop-and-smell-the-roses approach to skin care.”

## The Way They Were

Once upon a time, “people used plain water or harsh soaps on their faces,” says Dendy Engelman, a New York City dermatologist. Cleansers weren’t deserving of discussion, never mind devotion — for good reason. Old-school suds had a high pH level, so they’d dry your skin and irritate it. “They’d cause swelling of the skin and bind to proteins, reducing the ability of the skin to hold water, leading to tightness and dryness,” wrote Zoe Diana Draelos, a consulting professor of dermatology at Duke University School of Medicine in Durham, North Carolina, in her new study on the subject, published in the *Journal of Cosmetic Dermatology*.

In the last century, most [facial cleansers](#) have become soap-free; they contain

synthetic detergents with lower pH levels (like [sodium lauryl sulfate](#) and sodium laureth sulfate) instead. But these modern detergents are not without fault. They work by dissolving oils — but they do so indiscriminately, removing hydrating natural lipids along with the sebum and grime you want to get rid of, explains cosmetic chemist Kelly Dobos.

## Cleaning Up Their Act

In recent years, cleansers have evolved dramatically — physically, aesthetically, sensorially — with the understanding that we're profoundly informed, armed with a checklist of ingredients to avoid, and very much aware that “squeaky-clean” isn't the goal.

“The rule of cleansers has become ‘First, do no harm’ — cleanse without compromising the integrity of the skin,” says [Joshua Zeichner](#), a dermatologist in New York City. To this end, “a whole new crop of surfactants has been developed, including gluconates and isethionates, all specifically made to be mild,” says Dobos. Scientists have even come up with ways to make classic detergents, like sodium lauryl sulfate, less aggressive — they're often combined with special polymers to form larger cleansing complexes that won't irritate skin. And the rapid expansion of “[green beauty](#)” has brought with it gentle plant-derived surfactants sourced from coconut, shea, and fruit sugars.

A lot of cleansers even give back to the skin — depositing fatty acids, oils, triglycerides, ceramides — to leave your face softer than they found it. The most sophisticated formulas include advanced ingredients proven to stick to, or even penetrate, the skin when slowly massaged in, says New York City dermatologist Macrene Alexiades, who spiked her own face wash ([37 Actives High Performance Anti-Aging Cleansing Treatment](#)) with antioxidants and a polypeptide that helps seal in hydration as the surfactants dissolve excess oils.



## Objects of Our Affection

Part of this whole kinder-cleanser movement is “the skyrocketing percentage of women who say they have sensitive skin,” says [Amy Wechsler](#), a dermatologist and psychiatrist in New York City. Aaaaand...cue the deluge of [micellar waters](#), with surfactants so impossibly gentle, you don’t even need to rinse them off. And more and more brands are swapping out fragrances (which have the potential to irritate) for “natural extracts that provide a fresh scent and are also therapeutic,” says Alexiades.

“My customers love their cleansers to be scented, but it has to be an organic smell,” says Courtney Dunlop, the owner of the Good Skin Day skin-care boutique in Springfield, Missouri. Even people who generally abhor fragranced skin care want aromatic cleansers, she adds, because the scent doesn’t stick around — you notice it only while washing. And that scent very often becomes part of a cleanser’s identity, boosting its cult appeal. Suzanne LeRoux, the founder of One Love Organics, credits the plant-based pineapple in her [Vitamin B Enzyme Cleansing Oil](#) with hooking so many fans.

At the end of the day, though, we all just want our face to feel clean. This very fundamental need — epidermal decontamination — has long been the driving force behind [Korea’s double-cleansing ritual](#). “South Korea’s pollution levels are some of the highest in the world,” says Charlotte Cho, a cofounder of the K-beauty shop Soko Glam. So while the multistep Korean regimen may initially seem excessive, “it’s just a part of our normal routine,” says Cho. “A routine where cleansing is the most important step.”

Here in the United States, even pragmatic dermatologists are getting behind double-cleansing, recommending it especially to urbanites in pollution-saturated areas. The process involves first using an oil-based cleanser that will lift away makeup, sunscreen, and other oil-based stuff, and following with a water-based formula, usually a cream or a balm. “Microscopic pollution particles can get into pores and create free radical damage, promoting brown spots and premature

wrinkling,” says New York City dermatologist [Whitney Bowe](#). “Cleansing twice, starting with an oil, can remove even the tiniest debris.”

## The Psychology of Clean

Molecular tweaks to soaps can't be the only catalysts for our obsession — surfactants simply aren't titillating enough to spark or sustain the adoration we have today for our favorite cleansers.

The new truth: “Cleansers have developed a higher purpose,” says beauty entrepreneur Marcia Kilgore, whose brainchildren include Beauty Pie, Soap & Glory, and Bliss Spa. More than mere liquids we slap on and rinse off, they're twice-daily instruments of intention and meditation; they're stress busters and coping mechanisms. Or at least they can be.

“Cleansers have become part of our rituals of wellness and self-care,” says Nancy Etcoff, an assistant clinical professor of psychology in the department of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. “And rituals — even meaningless ones — can reduce stress and lead to an increased sense of control.” Which is something we're all craving. Google searches for “self care” reached a five-year high following the 2016 presidential election — perhaps the most dramatic race in American history. It's no wonder we're turning our attention inward to tune out the noise and fixate on something pure.

These moments of quiet in front of the sink are more than just a brief escape, though. “Cleansing enables a sort of physical catharsis,” says Rachel Anise Wegter, a communication-studies professor at Golden West College in Huntington Beach, California. “It allows us to wash away the stress, frustration, and literal dirt we've encountered throughout the day.” And that alone is something to rave about.

A version of this article originally appeared in the [April 2018 issue](#) of *Allure*. To get your copy, head to newsstands or [subscribe now](#).

## More on cleansing:

- [The 12 Best Cleansing Balms for Every Skin Type](#)
- [The 15 Best Face Washes for Oily Skin](#)
- [Find the Best Face Wash for Acne](#)

## 100 Years of Skincare