

ALLERNOTE STARTER GUIDE

How to Read a Cosmetic Label

That wall of Latin and chemistry on the back of the bottle follows rules. Learn the handful that matter and an ingredient list stops being a mystery.

INCI BASICS**WHERE ALLERGENS HIDE****RED-FLAG WORDS****You'll learn to**

- Read the order of an ingredient list correctly.
- Spot where fragrance and preservative allergens hide.
- Tell "fragrance-free" from "unscented".

Five rules of an ingredient list

INCI is the standard naming system. Once you know how it's ordered, you can read any label.

- 1 It's ordered by amount — until it isn't**
Ingredients are listed from most to least. But anything under 1% can be listed in any order, so the back half of the list isn't ranked. Water (Aqua) is usually first.
- 2 Latin/binomial = a plant or oil**
"Butyrospermum Parkii" is shea butter; "Lavandula Angustifolia" is lavender. Botanical names look scary but just name a natural ingredient — which can still be an allergen (e.g. lavender, tea tree).
- 3 Colourants sit at the very end**
Look for CI followed by 5 digits (e.g. CI 77491) or "+/-" / "may contain" — these are pigments, listed separately from the concentration order.
- 4 One word can hide dozens**
"Fragrance / Parfum" is not one ingredient — it can carry dozens of components, including known allergens. "Flavor / Aroma" works the same way for lip products.
- 5 The same ingredient has many names**
An allergen can appear under its INCI name, a trade name, or an abbreviation. Methylisothiazolinone is also "MI"; quaternium-15 releases formaldehyde. Recognising the synonyms is the whole game.

Where allergens hide

Four places on a label worth a closer look.

Fragrance / Parfum

The biggest blind spot. If a label just says “Fragrance” with nothing broken out, you can’t know what’s inside — treat it as unknown.

The “-eth”, urea & isothiazolinone clues

Names ending in patterns like DMDM Hydantoin, Diazolidinyl Urea, or Quaternium-15 are formaldehyde-releasers; Methyl(chloro)isothiazolinone are common preservative allergens.

“Natural” and essential oils

Limonene, Linalool, Citronellol, Geraniol and Eugenol are fragrance allergens that come from natural oils — “natural” does not mean low-allergen.

“May contain” colourants

CI numbers and “+/-” lists at the end can include pigments (e.g. carmine/CI 75470) some people react to.

FRAGRANCE-FREE ` UNSCENTED

Fragrance-free means no fragrance was added. **Unscented** often means a masking fragrance was added to cover a smell — so an “unscented” product can still contain fragrance allergens. For reactive skin, fragrance-free is the safer label.

QUICK SCAN

Red-flag words

Not “bad ingredients” — just the names that most often cause contact reactions. Worth pausing on if your skin reacts.

Fragrance

- ^a Fragrance / Parfum
- ^a Linalool
- ^a Geraniol
- ^a Coumarin
- ^a Limonene
- ^a Citronellol
- ^a Eugenol

Formaldehyde-releasers

- ^a DMDM Hydantoin
- ^a Imidazolidinyl Urea
- ^a Sodium Hydroxymethylglycinate
- ^a Diazolidinyl Urea
- ^a Quaternium-15

Isothiazolinones

- ^a Methylisothiazolinone (MI)
- ^a Methylchloroisothiazolinone (MCI)

Other common ones

- ^a Lanolin / Wool alcohols
- ^a Cocamidopropyl Betaine
- ^a Propylene Glycol
- ^a Colophonium (rosin)

› Only a patch test tells you what **you** react to. This list is for recognising names, not avoiding everything on it.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO MEMORISE ALL OF THIS

Point your camera. Get the answer.

Save your allergens once, then scan any ingredient list. AllerNote reads the label, decodes the synonyms, and tells you safe or avoid for your own triggers — in seconds.

- **Scan a label** · allernote.com/tools/try
- **Browse the ingredient encyclopedia** · allernote.com/learn/ingredients