BEAUTY

Is Petrolatum Still the Gold Standard?

Petrolatum has a formidable reputation, but the evidence supports a simpler verdict: moisturising matters more than finding one supposedly unbeatable ingredient.

The jar that refuses to disappear

Your bathroom shelf may be crowded with creams promising smoother, younger-looking skin. Yet petrolatum-the unglamorous staple hiding in many basic moisturisers-keeps turning up beside them. Its staying power has helped create a bigger claim: that it remains the "gold standard" against which every moisturiser should be judged.

That phrase sounds scientific. The evidence available here does not quite earn it. Research supports moisturisers for dry skin and eczema, and one systematic review found benefits from formulations containing petrolatum and glycerin in older people. But that is not the same as proving petrolatum alone is superior to every cream, lotion or ointment you could buy.

This distinction matters because "gold standard" can quietly turn a useful ingredient into a universal answer. Your skin may be dry because it is ageing. You may have eczema, which involves dry skin, intense itching and inflammatory lesions. Or you may simply be choosing among cosmetics whose labels make their differences seem larger than the evidence does.

Petrolatum deserves a place in that conversation. It does not deserve the whole conversation. The strongest case for it begins not with prestige, but with what research consistently finds about moisturising itself.

What the evidence actually rewards

A 2017 systematic review examined 77 eczema studies involving 6,603 participants. Taken together, moisturisers reduced investigator-assessed disease severity and produced fewer flares than control treatments. When moisturisers were added to an active topical treatment, the combination performed better than active treatment alone on disease severity and flares.

Those findings make moisturising look important, but they do not identify a single champion. The studies tested different formulations, measured different outcomes and often had methodological weaknesses: 36 were judged at high risk of bias, 34 at unclear risk and only seven at low risk. The authors' conclusion was unusually useful for shoppers: they found no reliable evidence that one moisturiser was better than another.

Even positive ingredient findings were often modest. Glycerol-containing moisturisers produced improvements in some eczema measures, but one measured change did not reach the threshold considered important. Urea-containing cream improved dryness in one study, yet more participants reported adverse events. Oat-containing moisturisers did not consistently improve severity compared with no treatment or a vehicle, although some low-quality evidence suggested fewer flares.

That leaves petrolatum in a less dramatic but more defensible position. It belongs to a category-moisturisers-with meaningful evidence behind it. The supplied trials do not show that its presence automatically makes a product the best one, or that a more elaborate formula necessarily performs better.

Petrolatum can be basic, useful and well supported without being unbeatable.

Where petrolatum earns its reputation

The clearest direct support comes from a 2020 systematic review of non-drug skin care in older adults. It included 63 articles covering dryness, itching, skin-barrier improvement, skin tears and other problems. Formulations containing glycerin and petrolatum reduced the incidence of skin tears, while lipophilic leave-on products containing humectants reduced dryness and itching.

That is valuable evidence, especially because ageing skin becomes thinner, loses fat, may become dry and can take longer to heal. But notice what the review studied: formulations containing both glycerin and petrolatum, not a contest in which pure petrolatum defeated all alternatives. The review also reported substantial variation in study designs, interventions and outcomes.

Other details complicate the idea of one definitive ingredient. In the same review, cleansers containing synthetic detergents or amphoteric surfactants improved dryness compared with standard soap and water. Leave-on products with a lower pH improved the skin barrier. Skin care worked as a system: what washed the skin, what stayed on it and how products were used all mattered.

Petrolatum's reputation is therefore strongest when it is kept in proportion. Evidence connects petrolatum-containing formulations with a useful outcome in older skin, while broader evidence supports moisturisers for eczema and dry skin. What it does not provide is a universal hierarchy with petrolatum permanently installed at the top.

The label tells the quieter truth

A cosmetic ingredient list can tell you more than the grandest claim on the front. Manufacturers are required to list the ingredients in a cosmetic on its container. If a product is both a cosmetic and a drug, an active ingredient should be listed first; that is the chemical responsible for the intended drug effect.

Marketing terms are less dependable. Labels such as "natural" and "hypoallergenic" have no official meaning, so companies can use them in different ways. A plain-looking petrolatum product is not necessarily inferior because it lacks those words. Equally, seeing petrolatum in a luxurious formula does not establish that the entire product works better than a simpler moisturiser.

The rest of the list can matter to your skin. Cosmetics can cause allergic reactions, often beginning with red, irritated skin. Fragrances and preservatives are the most common causes of cosmetic-related skin problems. That does not make every fragranced or preserved product unsuitable; it means petrolatum's presence cannot tell you everything about the finished formula.

This is also where an ordinary moisturiser question can become a medical one. Eczema is a chronic inflammatory skin disease, and current adult guidelines strongly recommend moisturisers alongside several prescription topical therapies. If you think you have eczema, need treatment for inflamed skin or have questions about a reaction, that is a conversation for a healthcare professional-not a contest between cosmetic jars.

Take an ingredient-list test

This week, ignore the front of your moisturiser and turn the container around. You need the container itself and its ingredient list. Look for petrolatum, but also note glycerin and whether fragrance appears. The purpose is not to declare individual ingredients good or bad. It is to see what you are actually comparing.

If petrolatum is present, the evidence supports a measured conclusion: it appears in formulations associated with fewer skin tears in older people, while moisturisers as a group help with dry skin and eczema. The evidence does not let you infer that the product is superior merely because petrolatum is there.

If petrolatum is absent, that does not make the moisturiser pointless. Reviews found benefits from several kinds of moisturiser, and no reliable evidence that one was best for eczema. The practical question is not whether your jar carries the reigning ingredient. It is whether you are using a moisturiser that suits your needs without causing irritation.

The phrase "gold standard" asks you to believe in a winner. Your ingredient-list test asks something more useful: what is in this product, and what does the evidence actually support? Keep the container nearby for a week. If your skin becomes red or irritated, stop treating the label as a puzzle and discuss the reaction with a healthcare professional.

Petrolatum can be basic, useful and well supported without being unbeatable. That is not a demotion. It is a reason to spend Monday reading the back of the jar instead of being persuaded by the front.

Where this comes from

- Skin Aging

  MedlinePlus, U.S. National Library of Medicine · https://medlineplus.gov/skinaging.html
- Cosmetics

  MedlinePlus, U.S. National Library of Medicine · https://medlineplus.gov/cosmetics.html
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