

Co-Wash: What It Is, Who It's Best For & How to Formulate It

A practical guide to cleansing, conditioning, slip, pH, viscosity, lather, and formulation balance

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IN THIS HANDOUT

Co-washes are beautiful, versatile formulations that combine mild cleansing with conditioning. This guide covers who they are best for, how to use them, the main ingredient categories, and key formulation targets for pH, viscosity, lather, slip, and active surfactant matter.

Co-Wash Essentials

A co-wash, short for conditioner wash, is a cleansing conditioner designed to remove light oils, sweat, dirt, and everyday buildup while simultaneously conditioning the hair.

A well-formulated co-wash sits between a traditional shampoo and a rinse-off conditioner. The goal is gentle cleansing with enough conditioning, softness, slip, and detangling to leave the hair refreshed without feeling stripped or heavily coated.

Who Is It Best For?

- Curly and coily hair, including Type 4A, 4B, and 4C hair
- Dry, fragile, or textured hair that is prone to tangling
- Thick or coarse hair that benefits from richer conditioning
- Color-treated or chemically processed hair that may benefit from gentler cleansing
- Fine hair when the conditioning system is formulated lighter and designed to rinse cleanly

How to Use a Co-Wash

1. Detangle strands and thoroughly wet the hair and scalp.
2. Apply the co-wash to the scalp and roots.
3. Massage gently for 1-2 minutes. Mechanical cleansing is especially important with a low-lather product.
4. Work the product through the lengths and detangle as appropriate.
5. Rinse thoroughly. A separate conditioner may or may not be needed depending on the formula and hair type.

JOAN'S FORMULATION NOTE

Co-washes can be formulated for several different hair types, but not in exactly the same way. A richer conditioning system may work beautifully for dry or coily hair, while fine hair usually needs a lighter system with less weight and a cleaner rinse.

AFTER RINSING, THE HAIR SHOULD FEEL

Clean, soft, smooth, detangled, and manageable, without feeling squeaky, stripped, greasy, or excessively coated.

Formulation Map: Main Ingredient Categories

A professional co-wash is built as a complete system. Each ingredient category contributes to cleansing, conditioning, structure, slip, stability, or preservation.

Ingredient Category	Function in the Co-Wash
Water Phase	Distilled water, hydrosols, and other appropriate aqueous ingredients form the continuous phase.
Mild Cleansing Surfactants	Often amphoteric and/or mild nonionic surfactants. The goal is enough cleansing without turning the product into a conventional shampoo.
Cationic Conditioning System	Conditioning agents or conditioning emulsifiers provide detangling, antistatic benefits, smoothness, and substantivity.
Fatty Alcohols	Cetyl, cetearyl or behenyl alcohol can contribute body, creaminess, slip and sensory richness.
Conditioning Polymers	Cationic guar, Polyquaternium-7, Polyquaternium-10 or other compatible polymers can improve wet combing and deposition.
Humectants	Examples include glycerin, panthenol, sodium PCA, betaine or saccharide isomerate, depending on the desired hair feel.
Emollients	Lightweight oils, esters or other emollients support softness. Keep levels lower for fine hair and richer for dry/coily hair.
Hair & Scalp Actives	Use selectively to support the product concept - for example panthenol, plant proteins, amino acids or soothing ingredients.
Preservative + Chelator	A water-based co-wash requires an appropriate broad-spectrum preservation system. A chelator can support stability and preservation.
pH Adjuster	Adjust and verify the final product pH after manufacturing and cooling.

THINK IN SYSTEMS, NOT SINGLE INGREDIENTS

The performance of a co-wash comes from the complete system: surfactants + cationic conditioning + structure + slip + emolliency + preservation + pH. Increasing one category without considering the others can create poor rinse, buildup, heaviness, insufficient cleansing or instability.

Development Targets

Use these targets as development starting points, not fixed rules. Final specifications should be based on the exact ingredients, supplier guidance, target hair type, packaging, and performance testing.

Property	Typical Target	Formulation Note
Finished pH	Approx. 4.5-5.5	A useful target for many conditioning hair products; verify compatibility with every ingredient and the preservative.
Viscosity	Medium to medium-high	Often conditioner-like: creamy, pumpable or squeezable. Design viscosity around packaging and user experience.
Lather	Low to very low	A light creamy foam is acceptable; abundant shampoo-like foam is usually not the goal.
Cleansing	Mild but noticeable	Should remove light oils, sweat and everyday buildup without leaving hair stripped.
Slip	Moderate to high	Especially important for curly, coily and textured hair and for detangling during washing.
Active Surfactant Matter	Approx. 3-8% starting point	Not a rule. Calculate active matter from supplier concentrations and test the actual cleansing performance.

FORMULATING FOR DIFFERENT HAIR TYPES

- Fine or wavy hair: keep the conditioning system and oil phase lighter, with a clean rinse.
- Curly hair: focus on mild cleansing, excellent slip, moisture, and moderate conditioning.
- Coily / Type 4 hair: consider richer conditioning, excellent wet slip, detangling, and low stripping potential.
- Heavy product buildup: increase cleansing carefully or position the co-wash between periodic shampoo or clarifying treatments.

FORMULATION TIP

Low lather does not mean no cleansing. Calculate active surfactant matter so you understand the true surfactant level in the finished formula rather than judging cleansing only by the percentage of raw surfactant ingredients.

Quick Reference / Development Checklist

Use this checklist while developing and evaluating a co-wash at the formulation bench.

- ☐ Define the target hair type before choosing the richness of the conditioning system.
- ☐ Select a mild surfactant system and calculate active surfactant matter.
- ☐ Build enough conditioning and slip for detangling without creating excessive buildup.
- ☐ Match emollient and fatty-alcohol levels to the target hair type.
- ☐ Confirm the surfactant system is compatible with the cationic conditioning system.
- ☐ Choose packaging before finalizing viscosity.
- ☐ Measure and adjust the pH of the finished, cooled product.
- ☐ Evaluate scalp cleansing, wet slip, rinse, dry feel, and next-day buildup.
- ☐ Complete appropriate stability, packaging compatibility, and preservative efficacy testing.

The Main Takeaway

REMEMBER

A well-formulated co-wash should be clean enough to refresh the scalp and hair, yet conditioned enough to leave the hair soft, smooth, detangled, and manageable - without feeling stripped or heavily coated.

LEARN MORE

Learn how to calculate active surfactant matter and use it to design balanced, professional shampoo, co-wash, and other hair care formulations in the Professional Natural Hair Care Formulation Course.

Read the full Co-Wash article and explore professional cosmetic formulation training at www.JoanMorais.com.

Educational formulation reference by Joan Morais. Always follow supplier specifications and verify preservation, stability, packaging compatibility, and finished-product performance.