

CO-WASH = GENTLE CLEANSING + CONDITIONING + SLIP + MANAGEABILITY

What Is a Co-Wash?

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

Especially Well Suited For	May Need a Lighter or Different Approach
• Curly and coily hair • Type 4A, 4B and 4C hair • Dry or fragile hair • Thick or coarse hair • Textured hair prone to tangling • Color-treated or chemically processed hair	• Very fine hair - avoid excessive richness • Very oily scalps - may require more cleansing • Heavy styling-product users - clarify periodically • Hair easily weighed down by oils, fatty alcohols or conditioning polymers

How to Use a Co-Wash

- 1 Detangle strands and thoroughly wet the hair and scalp.
- 2 Apply to the scalp and roots.
- 3 Massage the scalp gently for 1-2 minutes; mechanical cleansing matters 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.

What Should the Hair Feel Like After Rinsing?

- Clean, but not squeaky or stripped
- Soft and smooth
- Detangled with good wet slip
- Manageable, without excessive coating or heaviness

Main Ingredient Categories

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

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% as a development starting point	Not a rule. Calculate active matter from supplier concentrations and test the actual cleansing performance.

Co-Wash Development Checklist

- ☐ 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, compatibility and preservative efficacy testing.

THE FORMULATION GOAL

Clean enough to refresh the scalp and hair. Conditioned enough to leave the hair soft, smooth, detangled and manageable.

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](#).

This handout is an educational formulation guide, not a finished formula. Ingredient use levels and processing requirements vary by raw material and supplier.

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