
NAIL GELS

101

Guide



By Paola Ponce



NAIL GELS 101

A guide to quickly help you understand any gel in the market.

The ONLY two categories of nail gel...

Gel nails have existed since the late 80's, and have experienced an astonishing growth in popularity within the last 15 years after the introduction of 'gel polish'.

And it doesn't end here. The UV gel nail sector is forecasted to grow at least 5% within the next 5 years. (sources: *Market Data Forecast, Fact.Mr*)

With a 35+ year existence and a 5 year positive forecast, gel nails are here to stay, and for a while!

But not all gel is created equal, and this is why I wanted to create a guide that helped anyone, in the most simplest of terms, understand the different types of gels in the industry- and most importantly, understand all the trendy terms floating around on the web.

You see, the truth is, there are only two types of gel...

Hard gel and soft gel. Yep. That's it.

[*Sidenote:* Soft gel is also commonly referred to as "soak-off" gel, and a whole bunch of other "new" names, I'll get to in a moment.]

So next time you grab hold of a nail gel product... Your only question should be, "Is this a hard gel, or soft gel?"

Now the words "hard" and "soft" do not actually refer to the texture and feel of the gel.

For example, you can take a soft gel and cure it, and it will feel hard, yet it is still a soft gel.

All "hard" and "soft" means in the classification of nail gels is whether or not the product can be broken down in acetone.

Hard gel cannot, and therefore when it is cured on the nail and ready to be removed, the only way to remove it is by filing it down and leaving a thin layer behind on the nail plate. Then your natural nails are supposed to grow out and shed that layer. (Unless you used a soft gel (soak-off) base!)

Soft gel can be broken down with acetone, and therefore once cured on the nail plate and ready to be removed, you would file it down thin, and use an acetone wrap to break it down and gently exfoliate any residue left on the nail.

However, when using structure soft gel, you do not have to soak it off the nails to remove it fully. Unless, that is your goal. In which case you will file it down thin and soak it off in acetone. Otherwise, the ideal thing is to treat it as a hard gel, in the sense of filing it down thin, leaving a thin layer behind, and reapplying.

Structure soft gel has been my specialty for at least 10 years now, and I continue to enjoy and rave about it, just as much as when I first came across it and it blew my mind.

Here's why...

The history...

After servicing over 1000 different clients I realized one thing that people yearn for when getting their nails done the most, and that is ... *Feeling* like the nails are their very own.

This is THE WIN of wins when trying to grow your books with a loving and loyal clientele. The majority of people getting their nails done crave: wearing and feeling their own natural nails.

Even if a client wants a more than normal length and shape, they still want to feel like those nails grew out of their own fingertips.

And here's the thing, the number of people wanting to just have a clean or enhanced look of their very own nails is overwhelmingly large.

Most people who seek to get their nails done, just want to enhance the look and feel of their very own natural nails.

And for the longest time, I mean a solid 20 years, we (the nail industry) ignored this feeling, and even worse... didn't even bother to explore other material outside of acrylic and nail polish to satiate that innate desire of the client.

Very few techs or salons offered hard gel, which was the supposed "in-between" medium between acrylic and nail lacquer... But quietly, soft gel sat there, unnoticed and underappreciated, until the gel polish boom that started in 2009. Thank you Daniel Haley! (CEO & Founder of Gelish).

Gel polish gave the consumer hope that wearing their own nails and to new lengths was a possibility.

... that was, until three services later, and also three soak-off sessions later, when the natural nails started to deteriorate and fast. In order to have the gel manicure be long lasting, clients had to sacrifice length and keep the nails short.

Then the bad stigma among gel wearers began... "Gel damages my nails".

And they were right. Sort-a. It was not the actual gel, but the process of getting gel nails done that was causing the damage.

As businesses started to suffer with clientele loss and concern, they had to seek alternatives.

Some went back to acrylic, others started exploring with hard gel, and few re-thought soft gel, (But those that did won and are still winning today! Just keep reading to find out how).

And remember "the ultimate win" is satiating the client's desire, to wear and love their very own nails, at any length.

I was one of those techs who panicked when gel polish was no longer serving my clients, and

I went back to hard products, in my case back to playing around with hard ge systemsl.

The learning curve from gel polish to hard gel is HUGE, and it was even more upsetting that even when I nailed every step, and my applications were smooth and beautifully polished, clients would still experience pop-offs.

It was so debilitating. It seemed like I was taking one step forward, and two back. Sometimes losing a client or two. Which is such a detriment in a client-based business.

I grew so desperate, that I remember saying to myself, I'm going to master this nail thing, or I'M OUT. I'm talking, finding only ONE nail system that worked for all of my clients, and not a SINGLE client lifting again. Dead serious.

At this point I'm two years in my business, and making just about the same amount of money as my waitressing job... Which I thoroughly enjoyed!... but now wearing all the hats, and not getting paid adequately for any one of them.

But what had happened was...

(i.e. the reason why I pursued nails as a career. Sidenote: [I wrote this detailed guide to help you successfully launch your nail business as an independent.](#))

I just wanted to learn how to do my very own nails, so that they could be BEAUTIFUL while waiting tables. Yep. That was the only reason... but then I got a little addicted, and thought... Hey! I enjoy this! How about I major in it?

And here we are! (To this day, at least 90% of the time my nails look thebomb.com Can't forget my "why?", right?)

Either way, two years in, and I'm really ready to quit.

But I was going to give it one more shot. More education, however much more \$\$ it was going to cost me... this was it.

I had contemplated a nail system that was in my industry's magazine, but that I had put-off because a. I wasn't fully convinced I needed them, and b. It was, in my eyes, too expensive.

But their big BOLD promise was "lasts up to 6 weeks".

I couldn't tell you that I believed them or doubted them. I just kept reading about them.

I knew I had tried EVERYTHING ELSE at this point, what did I have to lose, \$400?

So what! I'm desperate. I promised that girl in the mirror I would save her business at whatever cost, or she had permission to quit.

I trained in the products, and applied it on my most problematic clients- and they worked. THEY FREAKIN' WORKED!

I knew that if these gels worked on them, they could work on ALL of my clients... And sure enough, they did.

I could literally cry right now because I can look back and know that I fulfilled that promise to that girl, the little budding entrepreneur that was me approx 10 years ago.

This new product that had saved my business was a soft gel product, more specifically, a structure soft gel product. And they were no other than the inventors of UV Soak-off Gel, Bio Sculpture Gel.

After approximately a year of exclusively using them, I was starting to hear about Japanese Gel Brands, and they were also in these tiny cute little pots like Bio Sculpture was, and that's when I discovered that in another part of the world there was a people THRIVING with structure soft gel systems, and then I started incorporating both within my services, with superb nail retention and client retention.

Now, all these years later, I am convinced that in order to master gel nail success, all you have to do, in the beginning of your nail journey at least, is to master soft gel.

Soft gel in comparison to hard gel feels lighter and less artificial on the nails. (Don't get me wrong! You can grow to a level in your career where all of your nail enhancements can look and feel very natural.)

This is exactly what the majority of nail wearers have wanted for years... lighter and less artificial-feeling nails!

Not only this, because naturally, soft gel is more flexible than hard gel, it also wears significantly better on natural nails.

[Structure soft gel systems can be found in pots or bottles. More on this a little later.]

Gel nail flexibility and why it is so important...

You could imagine my shock when soft gel started to work across ALL of my clients. Every single one.

After speaking to an educator she gave me a light bulb moment as to why soft gel works so well on the natural nail.

One word... flexibility.

Soft gel is flexible and moves (flexes) with healthy natural nails during day to day and inevitable casual impact.

However, you do have to be cautious when working on nails that are too bendy, weak, or damaged. With these types of nails, too much flexing leads to lifting, and so does too much hardness. *(I cover these concepts, as well as using the appropriate gel viscosity on the appropriate nail lengths, inside [my application course Master Gel Nails](#).)*

Most people don't have hard nails; which is why we're here right? Trying to learn about how to manicure nails best with the longest wearing products.

If most people had nice strong nails and could grow them without the use of nail enhancements, their problem would have been solved with nail polish way way back.

But the truth is, most of us do not have "nice nails" and cannot grow them past a certain length without the help of nail enhancements like gel.

Most of us have weak flexible nails and therefore are naturally very compatible with structure gel products. Whether they are hard or soft, so long as you choose the appropriate hardness and support level for the nails you are working on.

I personally have specialized in structure soft gel systems like Bio Sculpture and Japanese gel brands. *([To see exactly what I recommend, I created this cheatsheet](#).)* There are only a few occasions where I may incorporate hard gel products to my services (i.e . Extreme lengths and shapes, and nail corrections.)

Charting and defining it all...

Structure soft gel, specifically, has grown a number of trendy hype names. I'll drop everything in the chart below for a quick glimpse, and break it all down underneath it.

But let's never lose track of this... There are **only** two types of nail gel: hard gel or soft gel.

Below in the chart, you'll see commonly used terms, and I'll also share with you examples of quality brands popular in that category (and keep in mind that some brands carry both hard and soft gel products).

Type	Terms	Characteristics	Nail Prep	Popular Brands
Soft Gel	Gel polish	Thin, and include thin lacquer ingredients (solvents) like "acetates" and cellulose.	- Buffed w/ a 180g buffer - pH Dehydrator - Bonder	Gelish, Shellac
	Structure Soft Gel Trendy terms for it: BIAB, Rubber Base, Builder Gel, Structure Gel, Pure Gel, Potted Soft Gel, Semi-hard Gel	Foundation gels come in different viscosities. The thinnest can wear like a gel polish base with little-to-no structure capability. While the strongest (potted soft gel builder) can build extensions. Can be found in pots or bottles. (Oftentimes, gels in a pot will be more viscous than those in bottle form. Bottle-form gels need to be diluted slightly to dispense easily from bottle). Color gels are not mixed with solvents.	- Etched or buffed w/ 180g (sometimes optional) - Bonder (sometimes optional)	Bio Sculpture, Kokoist, Nail Thoughts, Leafgel, Orly, Vetro, Izemi, Luxio, Apres, RÉDI BB Gel...
Hard Gel	Hard Gel Trendy terms for it: Builder Gel	Hard gel always has to be applied with thickness. If too thin, hard gel will crack. Color gels are also hard	- Etched w/ 180g - pH Dehydrator - Bonder	Akzentz, Light Elegance, Young Nails, IBD, RÉDI Builder Gel

		<p>gel.</p> <p>Most often found in pots, rarely in bottles</p> <p>Some hard gel lines recommend a “rubber base” (soft gel) as a basecoat</p>		
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Definitions...

Nail Gel: There are only a handful of components in a gel formula: oligomer, monomer, photoinitiator, and additives (like pigment as well as other ingredients that help craft the purpose of that particular gel).

In each component there can be more than one ingredient, but in general, those are the key components to formulate nail gel.

Gel Polish:

The explanation of this term is literally in the words... *It's a gel with polish ingredients.*

Here in the U.S. we call nail lacquer, “nail polish”.

Gel polish’s primary characteristic is that it is a gel in a bottle.

Gelish was the first gel polish brand. They are the inventors of the concept of gel in a bottle.

So by definition, when we call something “gel polish”, it has to be in a bottle and contain polish-like ingredients like acetates or cellulose or other solvents.

Gel polish brands: Gelish, Shellac, OPI Gel Color

Soft Gel:

Any nail gel product that breaks down in acetone

Structure Soft Gel:

Any soft gel that allows you to build structure with it, and provides “flexing” capability

It is often refer to as BIAB, rubber base, structure gel, builder gel, pure gel, true gel, potted soft gel, semi-hard gel

BIAB:

Stands for “builder in a bottle”.

Bottled builders are most often soft gel, and very commonly offered in tinted shades aside from clear.

Rarely is a bottled builder a hard gel because putting a gel in a bottle requires dilution, and hard gel needs all the viscosity it can absorb for durability and acrylic-like toughness.

The acronym “BIAB” is claimed to be trademarked by two brands, Orly and The Gel Bottle, so who invented it is a little up in the air. Though there were already builders in a bottle in the market, the concept, and specifically soft gel builders in a bottle, gained huge traction in 2018.

Rubber Base:

A term used to describe the bendy silicone-like feel of a soft gel once cured. Often the term “rubber base” and “BIAB” are used interchangeably to label products.

In my experience, I’ve used three bases that feel somewhat “rubbery” after curing. They are: Gelish Foundation Base, Bio Sculpture Clear Gel, and Vetro Fuji Base.

Some people also just use the word “rubber base” to denote that the product is soft gel/soak-off gel. I avoid doing this, as the baseline is soft gel and hard gel, not rubber base and hard gel.

From my recollection, “rubber base” started as a thing of using soft gel as a base gel before hard gel builder for better adhesion and compatibility to the nail.

Structure Gel:

Any gel type, soft or hard, used to give the nails structure. The term itself does not define whether a gel is a hard gel or soft gel.

Builder Gel:

Same as the term “structure gel”. Any gel type, soft or hard, used to give the nails structure. The term itself does not define whether a gel is a hard gel or soft gel.

Pure Gel:

Refers to gel without solvents (i.e. lacquer-like ingredients). Can refer to hard gel or soft gel, but by design, hard gel is a pure gel, and so when speaking of “pure gel” we’re typically trying to inform others that a particular soft gel is not in essence a “gel polish”, which contains solvents.

Potted Soft Gel:

Soft gel systems in a pot.

You can find both foundation gels and color gels in a pot or bottle, depending on what the brand offers.

Usually, not always, a gel will be found in a pot because it is more viscous (thick) and so its viscosity does not allow it to dispense easily from a bottle. In order to have a formula dispense easily from a bottle, it needs to be diluted a bit with more monomer.

Dilution naturally weakens the strength of a formula. So yes, often a gel found in a bottle is weaker than its counterpart in a pot, but I am happy to say that the dilution doesn't jeopardize the gel's strength significantly for most nail lengths.

However, if I wanted to use a builder to support longer nail lengths or create extensions, I would not use a builder in a bottle, but instead a potted soft gel builder. A potted soft gel builder is the strongest soft gel builder.

Most Japanese gel brands favor the use of gels in a pot vs bottle.

Semi-hard Gel:

A gel that is nearly as strong as hard gel but that soaks-off.

I first started hearing about this term from the company Kokoist. The term denotes the fact that their soft gels are not soft and bendy like the whole "rubber base" term implies, but rather that the altogether finish of the enhancement wears more like a hard gel... but by definition it is not, as hard gel does not soak off in acetone, but their products do... so they coined the term semi-hard.

Semi-hard can also refer to any soft gel builder (pot or bottle) that does not have a soft, bendy, or rubbery texture after curing. This includes some BIABs (like Nail Thoughts by Kokoist,) and potted soft gel builder.

Hard Gel:

You know. Gel that does not soak-off.

Hard gel builders must always be applied with structure or thickness, or they will crack.

This is why hard gel is most often found in pots, and very few times in bottles.

The few times hard gel can be found in bottles, it is usually as a top coat.

Hard gel cures SUPER glossy, which is why many lines incorporate it into a topcoat.

***What about "poly gel"?*...**

A "poly gel" or "acrygel" product, is a hybrid of acrylic powder and hard gel. The term "Polygel" is the term coined by its founding company, Gelish.

It is essentially a solid, putty-type gel that stays put without any self-leveling capability until it is pressed into shape with a stiff brush and alcohol.

Poly gel could be categorized as a hard gel as it does not soak-off, and an alternative to acrylic nails if you desire the strength without the smell of acrylics.

However, you'll often see techs using this hybrid material to make only the free-edge of an extension, and then use a builder gel (hard or soft) to create the body of the nail.

What about Gel-X Soft Gel Extensions?

Gel-X is a registered trademark of the brand Apres. The company that introduced full coverage tips to the world.

However, perhaps inadvertently, they also trained the world to incorrectly use the words "soft gel nails" to mean full coverage tip extensions.

Thankfully, their whole system, and all other full coverage tip systems are soak-off (i.e. soft gel), so in that regard we are not that way off.

But what is important to always remember is that "soft gel nails" ≠ full coverage tip systems.

As you have learned already, soft gel is just gel that soaks off, not a plastic tip system or a service.

About nail gel safety...

The safest nail gel is one that is cured properly under a curing unit.

The most dangerous thing you can do to harm yourself with gel nails is walk around with undercured gel on your nails.

The second most dangerous thing you can do with gel, is repeatedly get it on your skin, especially broken skin, during application.

Either scenario will cause you to become allergic to the particular brand you are using and/or any other gel nail product. An allergy is for life. If you are going to DIY, I highly encourage you to train with brands or professionals to know what you're getting yourself into. (I believe you'll come to appreciate just paying to get your nails done, and supporting an independent nail tech.

Either way, I'm glad you're here! And have read up to this point, it shows you care!)

The most allergenic component in nail gel is its monomer. Monomer is part of the recipe in making gel, as described earlier. The most common monomer is HEMA (hydroxyethyl-methacrylate).

With the DIY boom of 2020 and the easier nail application has gotten, both a number of unskilled users and desperate-to-cash-in new brands contributed to the surge in allergic reactions caused by HEMA.

Exposing yourself or anyone to uncured gel, will lead to allergic reactions, HEMA or other.

HEMA has been used in gel nail products without issue for many years. Cured properly, with the rest of the ingredients, and kept off of the skin and if the wearer isn't already allergic, monomers in gel nail products are safe.

What about “non-toxic” labels?

Just like an allergy to chemicals or ingredients (edible or not)...

Toxicity has to do primarily with dosage intake of the substance (whether by nose, eyes, skin, mouth), and a person's reaction to the dosage. Just about any substance can have toxic effects. (i.e. headache, nausea, dizziness, death?)

What do I personally do to not experience this?
Have proper ventilation in my workspace.

You'll see many small independent lines touting “10-free or non-toxic” but with so many reputable professional brands in the market, I can honestly tell you I have never seen any *gel* nail company's products having any said(listed) chemicals.

But I have seen a couple of those ingredients listed in the “10-free, or xx-free” lists be present in regular lacquer products.

Having one of those ingredients in your nail products, and it causing harm to you has to do with your history to it, and how much you intake of it (through nose, eyes, skin, mouth)

You can still check your xx-free list against your gels, but especially your regular lacquer products.

That being said, non-toxic as far as I know is a non-FDA approved term, and in my opinion oftentimes, a term exploited for marketing purposes.

So what do I use now and why?

For the sake of simplicity, for me and my students, for the last 5 years I've **only** used Japanese Gel Nail Brands.

In one sentence...

Japanese gel is an artistic structure gel.

This means it can allow you to work with natural nail lengths and various nail art styles (i.e. hand-painted, textured, embellished, really... any.)

The longer answer:

With some exceptions, some noteworthy characteristics of Japanese Gel include...

✨ Manufactured from scratch in Japan

Most often while owning their own production and working alongside their own chemists to oversee every detail including product safety and ingredient quality. This is the most premium feature of any nail brand, overseeing their own production.

✨ Pure gel formula

No solvents that could lead to quick chipping of the product and the formulation of your gel products to change over time.

✨ Traditionally applied from pots

Most often you will see the products in a pot, this is because this has been the traditional and most popular way adopted in Japan for applying gel nails. Bottles are used also, depending on the need, or if you prefer a thinner viscosity.

✨ Do not require bonder and dehydrator

The adhesion component is in the base gel. Less chemicals on the nail can mean healthier nails, yes, but also less money spent and shorter service times.

✨ Facilitate various art styles

I cannot think of one design type you cannot do with Japanese gel. If you love art, JG is worth your attention.

And because you've made it this far, I'd love to treat you to my Favorite 3 Japanese Gel Brands Comparison Chart.

I usually sell it for a small fee and gift it to our Master Gel Nails Course students so that they can build their course starter kit, but seriously, I appreciate you making it this far in this book.

When you're ready to review the Japanese Gel Comparison Chart, just copy & paste the following link to a new browser:

<https://paolaponcenails.com/comparison-pdf/>

The three brands that I chart, I have used for 8 years and counting (because of their long wear, versatility and how up to date they have kept!) I still, very much, recommend Bio Sculpture, but believe me... when you have an education-based business, simplicity is your friend. (But! Who knows! You may see me re-incorporate them again into my ecosystem.)

A BIG thank you before we close!

Now that you've learned all things nail gels, now you know your options. You don't have to use what I use, but I am beyond pleased with what I use, and if it didn't work for me and my students, I wouldn't continue using it.

Either way, before letting you go, I just want to thank you oh-so-much again for learning with me in this book and allowing me to teach you about nail gels!

You rock. Gel rocks! And remember, it's here to stay.

You'll see me around, and hopefully I can further mentor you in other parts of your journey with other valuable resources and courses.

Thank you again,

-Paola

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