

Animal Fat (Tallow) in Skincare: A Historical & Cultural Survey

A concise review of credible primary and secondary sources showing that animal fats (including tallow) were commonly used in topical skincare—ointments, balms, soaps, and protective applications—across many civilizations.

Ancient Egypt

Peer-reviewed overviews and biomolecular analyses indicate that Egyptian topical preparations frequently combined animal fats with plant oils, beeswax, resins, and aromatics. Medical papyri explicitly mention animal fats used topically as treatments or as bases for ointments. Museum and laboratory studies of balms and coffin “black coatings” likewise identify mixtures that include animal fat, and recent chemical characterizations of 18th-Dynasty embalming balms report fats alongside beeswax, plant oils, bitumen, and resins.

Classical World (Greece & Rome)

Ancient texts and encyclopedic summaries record that early soaps were produced by reacting alkali (from ashes) with animal fats. Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History* discusses *sapo* as a cosmetic/cleansing substance; modern reference works describe early soapmakers probably using ashes and animal fats—precursors to later household and personal cleansing applications.

Medieval & Early Modern Europe

Analyses of medieval cosmetic recipes (e.g., the Salerno tradition and texts attributed to “Trotula”) show that many recommended skincare preparations were ointments based on animal fats. Historical reviews of cosmetic materials similarly note that ointments were principally composed of animal fats and applied to protect skin from harsh environments.

Indigenous & Arctic Traditions

Ethnohistorical accounts record broad, everyday uses of rendered animal fats (e.g., seal oil) across Arctic communities—including their application to skin for cleansing and protection.

From History to Modern Natural Skincare

Across millennia, from Egyptian ointments to European balms and Arctic protective practices, animal fats have a documented role in topical skin applications. Modern cosmetic chemistry broadened the palette to include plant oils and synthetics, but the historical record is clear: animal fats were a routine base for ointments, soaps, and skin protectants.

Selected quotations

“Fat and grease from different animals are mentioned in various prescriptions, sometimes for internal use and other times topically as a treatment or as a base in the formation of ointments.” — Metwaly et al., 2021

“The suggested cosmetic preparations are mostly ointments, based on animal fats.” — Pisanti et al., 2022

Recommended Links (primary & secondary sources)

- Metwaly et al., 2021 – Traditional ancient Egyptian medicine:
<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8459052/>
- British Museum – Ancient Egyptian coffins and the mystery of “black goo”:
<https://www.britishmuseum.org/blog/ancient-egyptian-coffins-and-mystery-black-goo>
- British Museum Project – Molecular analysis of burial residue:
<https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/projects/molecular-analysis-ancient-egyptian-burial-residue>
- Scientific Reports (2023) – Biomolecular characterization of ancient Egyptian balms:
<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-023-39393-y>
- Nature (2023) – Biomolecular analyses enable new insights into ancient Egyptian embalming:
<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-022-05663-4>
- Encyclopaedia Britannica – Soap and detergent: <https://www.britannica.com/science/soap>
- Pisanti et al., 2022 – Medieval skincare routine (open access):
<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10087853/>
- MDPI Cosmetics (2023) – History of Natural Ingredients in Cosmetics:
<https://www.mdpi.com/2079-9284/10/3/71>
- Nunatsiaq News (heritage column) – 10 uses for a seal:
<https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/taissumani-nov-29/>
- TIME – Who Discovered Soap?: <https://time.com/5831828/soap-origins/>