



KIT GUIDE • CLEAN BEAUTY

Shop refills and sort empties for less waste

For frequent makeup buyers who want less packaging waste without giving up wear time. After reading, they will be able to audit what they own, choose refills that fit, and sort empties correctly.

- **Use first**
Finish open products before buying refills, since reduction beats new material.
- **Size matters**
Small mixed empties go to take back bins, larger plain packs may go curbside.
- **Water decides**
Water in a formula decides whether preservation and cool dry storage matter.

By Whitney Doyle · Updated Aug 16, 2026 · 10 min read

CONTENTS

01	Audit what you own before you buy	05	Care, shelf life and cost so refills stay in use
02	Choose refillable compacts that you will keep	06	The checklist
03	Compare glass, metal and paper packaging	07	Sources and further reading
04	What to refill, recycle at the till, or put in curbside		

Sixty five percent of cosmetics packaging is made from plastic and 95 percent is thrown away. Once that fact lands, the smartest move changes from buying something greener to using what is already owned and then choosing a refill that will actually stay in use. Use, refill, then recycle in that order.

01

Audit what you own before you buy

Lower waste starts with counting, not shopping. Pull out every powder, lip product and pencil, then list shades, finishes and how much is left. Finish refers to the surface look and feel, whether matte, satin or glow, and it helps to group like with like so open products get used first.

Payoff means how much color shows in one swipe, and checking payoff shows which products are still performing. Wear time is how long color and finish look right before fading, creasing or transfer, and transfer is color moving onto cups, masks or sleeves. A blush with weak payoff or a lipstick with short wear time may still work as a layer rather than a reason to replace it.

Depot what is usable into one refillable compact or palette. Many pressed powders and cream compacts can be moved into magnetic pans or a single palette, which cuts the number of cases kept in a drawer. Keep one everyday palette and one backup, then place the rest where they will be seen each morning.

A compact is the hinged case that holds powder or cream, often with a mirror. A pan is the shallow metal tray that holds the pressed product inside the case. When the pan still holds even color and smells normal, keep using it. When texture turns hard, patchy or off in smell, let it go.

The habit that saves money and material is simple. Shop the collection first, finish open products, then buy only the refill shade that fills a real gap.

FROM THE EDITORS

Sustainability in packaging follows reduce, reuse and recycle in that order. Reducing total material is almost always more impactful than changing material, so an audit that prevents one new compact matters more than swapping plastic for glass.

02

Choose refillable compacts that you will keep

Refillability depends on system design, hygiene, consumer adoption, shipping and refill availability. In plain terms, a refill only lowers waste when the case lasts, the refills stay in stock, the pan fits, and the routine for cleaning is easy enough to keep.

Start with the case. Look for a compact or palette with a sturdy hinge, a secure close and replaceable pans. Aluminum tins and well made cases with magnets tend to survive bag drops better than thin mixed plastic. Check that empty pans lift out cleanly and that new pans sit flat without rocking.

Then check supply before committing. Refill availability means the brand sells the pan on its own, restocks it on a steady schedule and states which case it fits. Shade extension is when a brand adds shades to an existing range, which can signal that the system will stay around. Doors means retail store locations that carry the brand, and more doors plus steady restock and sell through can mean easier reorders. Sell through is the share of stock that actually sells, while waitlist and dupe chatter can show demand without proving fit.

Pigment load is the amount of color pigment in the formula, and it affects how a refill performs across batches. A refill with steady pigment load and a finish that still looks right at hour eight is worth keeping. If testers note fading, patchiness or heavy transfer, the case will not save it.

Keep magnets and pans clean and dry. Wipe the inside of the case with a dry tissue, brush loose powder from magnets, and store in a cool dry drawer. Moisture under a pan can loosen glue and warp thin metal. Travel with the compact closed and cushioned, since rattling is what cracks pressed powder.

A fair view helps here. Founders who talk about undertones, doors and reorders in the same sentence often build better systems. Good product with weak refill supply or unclear fit will not sell harder over time, however nice the first launch looked.

Compare glass, metal and paper packaging

Life cycle notes compare materials on carbon, energy and recyclability, and each choice has limits. The useful question is not which material is good, but which pack protects the formula with the least material and can be refilled or recycled in practice.

Glass jars and bottles suit creams, foundations and fragrance. Glass can be recycled many times, but virgin glass is heavy and energy intensive to make. Recycled glass carries 20 to 30 percent lower carbon than virgin glass, with high recyclability. European container glass averages 53.5 percent recycled content, with about 80 percent for green, 50 percent for amber and 40 percent for flint clear glass. Color matters because recycled content varies by color and supplier. Top notes are the first impression of a fragrance, dry down is how it settles on skin, and sillage is the scent trail left in air, yet none of those change the fact that a heavy glass bottle with a mixed pump is harder to recycle than plain glass.

Metal includes aluminum tins, tubes and some caps. Aluminum is light, holds shape for balms and powders, and fits well in refill systems. Small metal parts still fall below the size that municipal systems handle well, so keep them for take back rather than the home bin.

PCR plastic means post consumer recycled plastic, and documentation should state verified material and percent, such as made with X percent post consumer recycled PET when substantiated. PCR PET and HDPE resin produces 70 to 86 percent less CO₂ and uses at least 79 percent less energy than virgin plastic. Color, clarity, supply and performance limits still apply. PET package recycling compatibility depends on the full system including cap, pump, label, adhesive, ink, color, residue and size, which is why a clear bottle with a simple cap recycles more easily than a frosted airless pump with mixed parts.

Paper and paperboard have high curbside recyclability and baseline to 10 percent cost premium in the comparison. Paperboard is useful for outer cartons but usually does not replace primary formula contact packaging for liquids, oils, creams or wet products without barriers. Coatings, pumps, mirrors and mixed materials are the limit on recycling. A paper compact with a plastic lining or mirror belongs with take back, not curbside.

FROM THE EDITORS

Treat coatings, mirrors, pumps, magnets and mixed layers as the recycling limit. When materials cannot be separated by hand, send the pack to a beauty take back bin and recycle only larger plain packs at home where accepted.

What to refill, recycle at the till, or put in curbside

Small beauty packaging often cannot go through municipal recycling. Municipal recycling cannot recycle small packaging like compacts, lipsticks, travel size items and squeezable tubes, according to Pact guidance shared by Ulta Beauty. Size, mixed materials and residue explain why.

Ulta Beauty stores have The Beauty Dropoff collection bin for hard to recycle empties, and empties can be any brand. Pact only collects hard to recycle beauty packaging like tiny tubes and caps, and items must be clean, unbagged and free of liquid. TerraCycle states there is no need to wash products before sending them, but users should use or remove as much product as possible. In practice that means scrape, wipe or pump out residue, keep items loose, and do not bag them.

Pact accepts plastic, metal and paper bottles and jars smaller than a yogurt cup or 2 inch by 2 inch, plus plastic and aluminum squeezable tubes. Send lipstick and lip gloss tubes with applicators, mascara tubes with wands, and plastic pencil components for eye, lip and brow pencils to Pact, which accepts them for recycling. Nordstrom BEAUTYCYCLE accepts pump dispensers, makeup palettes and mascara tubes from any brand, with a goal to take back 100 tons of beauty packaging by 2025. MAC Back to MAC accepts primary packaging including compacts, lipsticks and foundation bottles, and in 2024 processed over 271,000 pounds of containers equal to over 2.5 million lipsticks. Garnier with TerraCycle diverted more than 11 million beauty empties from landfills through its free recycling program.

Send to take back

ITEM	WHERE IT GOES	PREP
Compact, lipstick tube, lip gloss tube with applicator, mascara tube with wand, pencil parts, small tubes and caps	Beauty take back bin in store or brand program	Use up product, remove excess, keep clean, unbagged and free of liquid
Palette with mirror, pump dispenser, mixed material minis	Beauty take back bin where accepted	Empty as far as possible, keep parts together
Larger plain cardboard, metal, most glass and plastic larger than a fist labeled numbers 1, 2 and 5	Curbside where accepted	Rinse if required locally, sort by local rules

Cardboard, metal, most glass and plastic larger than a fist labeled numbers 1, 2 and 5 can and should be recycled at home where accepted. Local curbside acceptance for colored glass, frosted glass and small metal or plastic parts varies and must be checked locally.

Take back material may be mechanically recycled, molecularly recycled, or sent to waste to energy when it cannot be recycled. Material collected by Pact never goes to landfill and is directed to mechanical recycling, molecular recycling, or waste to energy. TerraCycle reports 98 percent of waste collected through its programs is recycled, and its beauty process was found 74 percent better than landfill and 67 percent better than waste to energy across eight impact categories. Those figures describe program averages, not a promise for any single compact.

05

Care, shelf life and cost so refills stay in use

A refill kept dry, cool and preserved will outlast a cheaper pan that breaks or turns. Storage and preservation decide that outcome more than packaging material.

Store powders dry and cool, press only with clean tools, and let pressed powder dry fully. Moisture softens binder and leads to cracks. Press with a clean coin wrapped in cloth or a sanitized tool, use light even pressure, then leave the pan open until fully dry. Keep the case shut after that to limit humidity.

Avoid adding water to finished products. Products without water such as salves, balms, lip balm and body butter usually do not need a preservative, but adding water, aloe, witch hazel or hydrosol creates conditions for bacteria and mold. Vitamin E and rosemary extract are antioxidants that slow oil rancidity but will not kill bacteria, yeast or fungi in water based lotions and creams. That distinction explains why some formulas cannot go waterless or preservative free and still stay safe.

Keep water based creams and lotions preserved and within pH and temperature limits. Use anhydrous balms and oils without added water when a simple routine is wanted. Refrigerate short term DIY batches made without preservatives and keep them small. Throw out anything that smells off, separates, changes color or feels gritty. How long opened powders and low waste formulas stay stable at home is unclear, so watch the product rather than the calendar and ask a dermatologist or pharmacist when skin reacts.

Cost per refill versus a new compact decides whether the system lasts. Which specific makeup refills fit which compacts, plus refill prices versus new compacts, vary by brand, so run the math at the shelf. Compare refill price to a new compact plus product, track how many refills the case lasts, and count cleaning and travel costs before switching. A durable case used for three or more refills usually beats buying new each time. A fragile case that needs replacing each year does not, even when refills look cheaper alone.

06

The checklist

-
- ☐ List every powder, lip and pencil product owned
-
- ☐ Finish one open product before buying a refill
-
- ☐ Depot usable shades into one magnetic palette
-
- ☐ Choose a sturdy case with replaceable pans
-
- ☐ Confirm refill shade, fit and restock before buying
-
- ☐ Keep magnets, pans and case clean and dry
-
- ☐ Store powders cool, dry and closed
-
- ☐ Never add water, saliva or aloe to finished makeup
-
- ☐ Discard products that smell off or change texture
-
- ☐ Send small mixed empties to take back bins clean and unbagged
-
- ☐ Recycle larger plain packs curbside only where accepted
-
- ☐ Compare refill price to full compact price over three fills
-

07

Sources and further reading

- Ulta Beauty - The Beauty Dropoff — Pact Collective · pactcollective.org
- Sustainable Cosmetic Packaging: Options, Certifications, and Reality Check · cosmetifull.com
- TerraCycle: the #1 beauty recycler · terracycle.com
- Sustainable Packaging Materials for Beauty and Personal Care Packaging: A Buyer's Guide · jpspackaging.com
- 10 Natural Preservatives for Homemade Lotion & Skin Care (+FAQS) · thenerdyfarmwife.com
- 7 Beauty Brands with Recycling Programs You Should Know About · smartsolve.com

For information only, not medical advice. Shade and wear notes reflect our testers' skin; patch test anything new, and check the full ingredient list if you have allergies or sensitive skin.



WRITTEN BY

Whitney Doyle

Whitney runs the news desk and the kit guides at Gloss Report. She keeps one spreadsheet of every launch date, restock and shade extension of the year, and can usually tell you the week a blush sold out and the week it came back.
