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NOTABLE NOTES

The Softest Rock on Earth

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The name for talc, a sheer white mineral, is derived from the Greek word *talq*, which means "pure." It is the softest rock on earth. Talc sculptures, vessels, and seals decorated with mythical creatures and animals created by the Mohenjo-Daro and Harappo craftsmen have been found that date back to over 5000 years ago. These craftsmen usually heated their talc, generating a hard, luminous surface.[1] Talc was also used in exquisite Chinese carvings as well as Assyrian cylindrical signets and seals. The ancient Egyptians created scarabs and amulets out of talc, which they commonly varnished with a blue, glossy finish.[2] In addition, talc sculptures from 1100 CE have been discovered in Belur, Halebid and Sravanabelagola, India. In 1890, the powdered form of talc—talcum powder—was found to relieve skin irritations caused by Johnson & Johnson's medicated plasters and was soon used in many other plaster mixes. Johnson & Johnson also realized that talc mitigated diaper rash, leading to the invention of Johnson's Baby Powder in 1894, which is still used today.[1]

We now know that talc, $Mg_3Si_4O_{10}(OH)_2$ or $H_2Mg_3(SiO_3)_4$, consists of hydrated magnesium silicate,[1] although some substitutions of aluminum, iron, or manganese can occur.[3] Talc is formed from soapstone, which is made of talc and other minerals, including mica, quartz, and iron. Over time, the soapstone naturally transforms into steatite and pure talc. Talc is nonporous, chemically inert, lamellar, and does not stain or burn.[1]

Although talc deposits exist throughout the world, the talc mined in each deposit has unique chemical and morphologic characteristics that make it best suited for different domestic and industrial applications.[3] Talc is primarily used in the ceramic and paper industries, although 5% of all consumed talc is used in cosmetics.[1] As a result of weak van der Waals forces, talc's crystalline sheets are able to easily slide past one another, creating a lubricant that moisturizes skin. These sheets are also very flexible yet durable, enabling talc to soften and smoothen skin. Talc's stratified sheets and its translucency allow it to cover up blemishes with just a thin coat. Because talc can be found as a solid, semisolid, or liquid matrix, talc is used in cosmetics that are solid, like antiperspirants and lipsticks; semisolid, such as blushes and eyeshadows; and liquid, like creams and lotions.[3] Talc is also used in a variety of products in other industries, including animal feed, electrical insulation, asphalt roofing, paint, tiles, soap porcelain, pill coating, plastic, rubber, putties, pencils, crayons, counter tops, tailor's chalk, chewing gum, and hard candy.[1,3] Thus, talc is very versatile material with both dermatological and nondermatological applications.

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