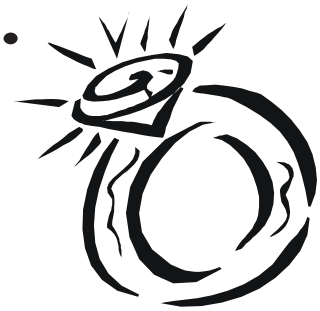
FTC FACTS for Consumers

All That Glitters...

How to Buy Jewelry



Buying jewelry can be fun, exciting and confusing. Whether you're considering a gift of jewelry for someone special or as a treat for yourself, take some time to learn the terms used in the industry. Here's some information to help you get the best quality jewelry for your money, whether you're shopping in a traditional brick and mortar store or online.

Gold

The word **gold**, used by itself, means **all gold** or 24 karat (24K) gold. Because 24K gold is soft, it's usually mixed with other metals to increase its hardness and durability. If a piece of jewelry is not 24 karat gold, the karat quality should accompany any claim that the item is gold.

The **karat** quality marking tells you what proportion of gold is mixed with the other metals. Fourteen karat (14K) jewelry contains 14 parts of gold, *mixed in throughout with* 10 parts of base metal. The higher the karat rating, the higher the proportion of gold in the piece of jewelry.

Most jewelry is marked with its karat quality, although marking is not required by law. Near the karat quality mark, you should see the name or the U.S. registered trademark of the company that will stand behind the mark. The trademark may be in the form of a name, symbol or initials. If you don't see a trademark accompanying a quality mark on a piece of jewelry, look for another piece.

Solid gold refers to an item made of any karat gold, if the inside of the item is not hollow. The proportion of gold in the piece of jewelry still is determined by the karat mark.

Jewelry can be plated with gold in a variety of ways. **Gold plate** refers to items that are either mechanically plated, electroplated, or plated by any other means with gold to a base metal. Eventually, gold plating wears away, but how soon will depend on how often the item is worn and how thick the plating is.

Gold-filled, gold overlay and **rolled gold plate** are terms used to describe jewelry that has a layer of at least 10 karat gold mechanically bonded to a base metal. If the jewelry is marked with one of these terms, the term or abbreviation should follow the karat quality of the gold used (for example, **14K Gold Overlay** or **12K RGP**). If the

layer of karat gold is less than 1/20th of the total weight of the item, any marking must state the actual percentage of karat gold, such as **1/40 14K Gold Overlay.**

Gold electroplate describes jewelry that has a layer (at least .175 microns thick) of a minimum of 10 karat gold deposited on a base metal by an electrolytic process. The terms **gold flashed** or **gold washed** describe products that have an extremely thin electroplating of gold (less than .175 microns thick). This will wear away more quickly than gold plate, gold-filled or gold electroplate.

Platinum, Silver and Other Metals

Platinum is a precious metal that costs more than gold. It usually is mixed with other similar metals, known as the platinum group metals: iridium, palladium, ruthenium, rhodium and osmium.

Different markings are used on platinum jewelry as compared with gold jewelry, based on the amount of pure platinum in the piece. The quality markings for platinum are based on parts per thousand. For example, the marking **900 Platinum** means that 900 parts out of 1000 are pure platinum, or in other words, the item is 90% platinum and 10% other metals. The abbreviations for platinum — **Plat. or Pt.** — also can be used in marking jewelry.

Items that contain at least 950 parts per thousand pure platinum can be marked simply **platinum**. Items that have at least 850 parts per thousand pure platinum can be marked with the amount of pure platinum and the word platinum or an abbreviation (for example, **950 platinum, 900 Plat.** or **850 Pt.**). Jewelry that contains less than 850 parts per thousand pure platinum, but has a total of 950 parts per thousand of platinum group metals (of which at least 500 parts is pure platinum), may be marked with both the amount of pure platinum and the amount of the other platinum group metals in the piece. For example, the marking **600 Plat. 350 Irid.** means that the item has 600 parts per thousand (60%) platinum, and 350 parts per thousand (35%) iridium, totaling 950 parts per thousand of platinum group metals, and 50 parts per thousand (5%) other metals.

The words **silver** or **sterling silver** describe a product that contains 92.5% silver. Silver products sometimes may be marked **925** which means that 925 parts per thousand are pure silver. Some jewelry may be described as silverplate: a layer of silver is bonded to a base metal. The mark **coin silver** is used for compounds that contain 90% silver. According to the law, quality-marked silver also must bear the name or a U.S. registered trademark of the company or person that will stand behind the mark.

Vermeil (ver-may), a special type of gold plated product, consists of a base of sterling silver that is coated or plated with gold.

Pewter items may be described and marked as such if they contain at least 90% tin.

Gemstones

Natural gemstones are found in nature. **Laboratory-created stones**, as the name implies, are made in a laboratory. These stones, which also are referred to as laboratory-grown, [name of manufacturer]-created, or synthetic, have essentially the same chemical, physical and visual properties as natural gemstones. Laboratory-created stones do not have the rarity of naturally colored stones and they are less expensive than naturally mined stones. By contrast, **imitation stones** look like natural stones in appearance only, and may be glass, plastic, or less costly stones. Laboratory-created and imitation stones should be clearly identified as such.

Gemstones may be measured by weight, size, or both. The basic unit for weighing gemstones is the carat, which is equal to one-fifth (1/5th) of a gram. Carats are divided into 100 units, called **points**. For example, a half-carat gemstone would weigh .50 carats or 50 points. When gemstones are measured by dimensions, the size is expressed in millimeters (for example, 7x5 millimeters).

Gemstone treatments or enhancements refer to the way some gems are treated to improve their appearance or durability, or even change their color. Many gemstones are treated in some way.

The effects of some treatments may lessen or change over time and some treated stones may require special care. Some enhancements also affect the value of a stone, when measured against a comparable untreated stone.

Jewelers should tell you whether the gemstone you're considering has been treated when: the treatment is not permanent; the treated stone requires special care; or the treatment significantly affects the value of the gemstone.

Some common treatments that you may be told about and their effects include:

- **Heating** can lighten, darken or change the color of some gems, or improve a gemstone's clarity.
- **Irradiation** can add more color to colored diamonds, certain other gemstones and pearls.
- **Impregnating** some gems with colorless oils, wax or resins makes a variety of imperfections less visible and can improve the gemstones' clarity and appearance.
- **Fracture filling** hides cracks or fractures in gems by injecting colorless plastic or glass into the cracks and improves the gemstones' appearance and durability.
- **Diffusion treatment** adds color to the surface of colorless gems; the center of the stone remains colorless.
- **Dyeing** adds color and improves color uniformity in some gemstones and pearls.
- **Bleaching** lightens and whitens some gems, including jade and pearls.

Diamonds

A diamond's value is based on four criteria: color, cut, clarity, and carat. The clarity and color of a diamond usually are graded. However, scales are not uniform: a clarity grade of "slightly included" may represent a different grade on one grading system versus another, depending on the terms used in the scale. Make sure you know how a particular scale and grade represent the color or clarity of the diamond you're considering. A diamond can be described as "flawless" only if it has no visible surface or internal imperfections when viewed under 10-power magnification by a skilled diamond grader.

As with other gems, **diamond weight** usually is stated in **carats**. Diamond weight may be described in decimal or fractional parts of a carat. If the weight is given in decimal parts of a carat, the figure should be accurate to the last decimal place. For example, ".30 carat" could represent a diamond that weighs between .295 - .304 carat. Some retailers describe diamond weight in fractions and use the fraction to represent a range of weights. For example, a diamond described as ½ carat could weigh between .47 - .54 carat. If diamond weight is stated as fractional parts of a carat, the retailer should disclose two things: that the weight is not exact, and the reasonable range of weight for each fraction or the weight tolerance being used.

Some diamonds may be treated to improve their appearance in similar ways as other gemstones. Since these treatments improve the clarity of the diamond, some jewelers refer to them as clarity enhancement. One type of treatment — **fracture filling** — conceals cracks in diamonds by filling them with a foreign substance. This filling *may not be permanent* and jewelers should tell you if the diamond you're considering has been fracture-filled.

Another treatment — **lasering** — involves the use of a laser beam to improve the appearance of diamonds that have black inclusions or spots. A laser beam is aimed at the inclusion. Acid is then forced through a tiny tunnel made by the laser beam to remove the inclusion. Lasering *is permanent* and a laser-drilled stone does not require special care.

While a laser-drilled diamond may appear as beautiful as a comparable untreated stone, it may not be as valuable. That's because an untreated stone of the same quality is rarer and therefore more valuable. Jewelers should tell you whether the diamond you're considering has been laser-drilled.

Imitation diamonds, such as cubic zirconia, resemble diamonds in appearance but are much less costly. Certain laboratory-created gemstones, such as lab-created moissanite, also resemble diamonds and may not be adequately detected by the instruments originally used to identify cubic zirconia. Ask your jeweler if he has the current testing equipment to distinguish between diamonds and other lab-created stones.

Pearls

Natural or **real pearls** are made by oysters and other mollusks. **Cultured pearls** also are grown by mollusks, but with human intervention; that is, an irritant introduced into the shells causes a pearl to grow. **Imitation pearls** are man-made with glass, plastic, or organic materials.

Because natural pearls are very rare, most pearls used in jewelry are either cultured or imitation pearls. Cultured pearls, because they are made by oysters or mollusks, usually are more expensive than imitation pearls. A cultured pearl's value is largely based on its size, usually stated in millimeters, and the quality of its nacre coating, which gives it luster. Jewelers should tell you if the pearls are cultured or imitation.

Some black, bronze, gold, purple, blue and orange pearls, whether natural or cultured, occur that way in nature; some, however, are dyed through various processes. Jewelers should tell you whether the colored pearls are naturally colored, dyed or irradiated.

A Jewelry Shopper's Checklist

When you're in the market for a piece of jewelry for yourself or someone you love, shop around. Compare quality, price, and service. If you're not familiar with any jewelers in your area, ask family members, friends, and co-workers for recommendations. You also should:

- Ask for the store's refund and return policy before you buy.
- Check for the appropriate markings on metal jewelry.
- Ask whether the pearls are natural, cultured, or imitation.
- Ask whether a gemstone is natural, laboratory-created, or imitation.
- Ask whether the gemstone has been treated. Is the change permanent? Is special care required?
- Make sure the jeweler writes on the sales receipt any information you relied on when making your purchase, such as the gem's weight or size. Some jewelers also may supply a grading report from a gemological laboratory.

In addition, these tips apply when you're shopping for jewelry online:

- Shop with companies you know or do some homework before buying to make sure a company is legitimate before doing business with it.
- Get the details about the product, as well as the merchant's refund and return policies, before you buy.
- Look for an address to write to or a phone number to call if you have a question, a problem or need help.

For More Information

If you have a problem with the jewelry you purchased, first try to resolve it with the jeweler. If you are dissatisfied with the response, contact your local Better Business Bureau or local consumer protection agency. You also may contact the Jewelers Vigilance Committee's Alternative Dispute Resolution Service. This program assists consumers and businesses in resolving disputes about jewelry. The Jewelers Vigilance Committee (JVC) is an independent, non-profit organization formed to advance ethical practices in the jewelry industry. You may contact the JVC by mail: 25 West 45th Street, Suite 400, New York, NY 10036-4902, or by phone: 212-997-2002.

The FTC works for the consumer to prevent fraudulent, deceptive, and unfair business practices in the marketplace and to provide information to help consumers spot, stop, and avoid them. To file a complaint or to get free information on consumer issues, call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357), or use the complaint form at www.ftc.gov. The FTC enters Internet, telemarketing, identity theft, and other fraud-related complaints into Consumer Sentinel, a secure, online database available to hundreds of civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad.