

Understanding Jewelry Metals

So you've finally decided to purchase your first [Rolex watch](#). You decide on your watch model and walk into a jewelry store only to find out that it's being sold in stainless steel, gold, and platinum. Besides the price difference, what is the difference between these metals? Here we're going to explain just that.

At a basic level, different metals offer a different appearance and durability. Tastes in jewelry tend to change by the decades. What was once popular 50 years ago is no longer popular today. Jewelry designers and watch manufacturers keep up with growing trends by producing their jewelry a particular way.

Gold

Let's begin with the most common material used for jewelry – gold. Gold comes in a variety of colors. It can be yellow, white, or rose. As long as the karat is the same among the different colors, there shouldn't be a price difference. The gold karat refers to the percentage of gold used. Here is a breakdown:

24 kt – 99.9% pure

18 kt – 75% pure (sometimes marked as 750)

14 kt – 58.5% pure (sometimes marked as 585)

10 kt - 41.7% pure

Keep in mind that there is also 20 karat gold, 16 karat gold, etc. Typically, in the United States we most often see 18kt and 14kt gold. This is because these tend to be the most durable while using a good chunk of gold. Higher karats are more malleable and prone to damage. Jewelry items like rings or bracelets normally take more abuse than say, earrings, so they are made durable. Gold would be too soft to use by itself in jewelry so it is mixed in with alloys such as copper or zinc. This is why there is a percentage of gold within the jewelry. In the United Kingdom and other countries it is possible to see gold that ranges from 9-kt to 22-kt. White and rose gold are created by mixing gold with metals of a particular color to obtain the desired appearance. There are some other terms that you should know as well:

Gold plated – gold plated jewelry means that a metal has been electroplated with gold. This creates a very thin layer of gold on top of the metal and normally wears off after a long time. Gold plated jewelry is much cheaper than actual gold jewelry.

Gold filled – In gold filled jewelry gold is bonded to a base metal such as brass through high temperature and pressure. High quality pieces may have the appearance of 14 karat gold but normally they do not look the same. Under the Federal Trade Commission, the gold portion must make up a certain percentage of the weight. This number varies according to the karat.

Gold vermeil – Gold vermeil is a gold plated silver jewelry. It is the same idea as the previously discussed terms. This is still much less expensive than actual gold jewelry, as significantly less gold content is used to plate the jewelry.

Platinum

Platinum is priced higher than gold as it is a more precious and heavier commodity. It has a white / silver appearance. It has become popular among [engagement ring jewelry](#) for its contemporary appearance. In order for a piece of jewelry to be considered platinum, it must consist of at least 95% platinum. Anything less identifies the piece as platinum alloy. Platinum jewelry is usually stamped with the letters “PLAT”.

Stainless Steel

Stainless steel is a very durable metal due to its resistance of corrosion and staining. It has a dark silver appearance. Stainless steel is a popular choice among some watch wearers as it is more resistant to scratches and abuse from banging the watch up against a table or wall.

Silver

Next up is silver on the list. Silver has been around almost as much as gold since ancient times. Silver is soft and must be mixed with metals to increase its durability. Sterling silver is at least 92.5% silver. Normally a “925” stamp appears on sterling silver jewelry that is commonly found in designer pieces like [Tiffany & Co](#). Here are some terms regarding silver that you should be familiar with:

Fine silver – Fine silver is 99.9% pure silver. However, it is not durable enough to be used in jewelry so it is not normally found in pieces.

Silver plated – Silver plated jewelry consists of a metal coated with a layer of silver. Jewelry that has been silver plated is much less expensive than sterling silver jewelry. The layer of silver wears off easily.

Other metals

Silver, gold, platinum, and steel aren't the only metals used in the production of jewelry, but they are the most common. Here are some less common metals that you may have heard of before:

Titanium – Titanium is the most durable metal of all. In addition, it is extremely light.

Tungsten – Tungsten is another durable metal. It has the highest melting point out of all metals. Many wedding bands are made of tungsten due to its durability.

Palladium – Palladium is a metal of the platinum family and has a lustrous silvery-white appearance. It is commonly used as an alternative to platinum for making white gold. Many jewelry pieces and even belt buckles are palladium plated to give off a white gold appearance.

Rhodium – Rhodium is a silvery-white hard metal from the platinum family. It is the most expensive precious metal. Some jewelry pieces are rhodium-plated to give them a protective coating and a platinum resemblance.

There are a few less common metals used in jewelry production, but it is not worth mentioning them here as these are the most common types. Prior to making an expensive jewelry or watch purchase, you should decide what kind of material you want. If you are looking for a durable watch, then maybe stainless steel is right for you. If you want a luxury watch for special occasions only, then maybe gold or platinum is more suitable for you.

If you have any questions for Raymond Lee Jewelers, please feel free to contact us at your convenience. We are open 10AM – 6PM on weekdays and 10AM – 5PM on Saturday. Our telephone number is 561-750-7808.