

SKINCARE REPORT

FRESH START

Retinols are like retirement plans: You know you need one, but there are so many versions and the research is overwhelming. Well, we did the homework for you, so it's time to woman up (your skin will thank you) BY GRACE GOLD

You've been hearing about it for years. Perhaps you even gave retinol a go and then abandoned it because nothing happened or, worse, you had crazy side effects. (I still remember a pal who tried it a few days before going to our friend's wedding and showed up with an angry red complexion and a dandruff-like dusting of flaked skin on the neckline of her gown.) But talk of retinol is buzzing again, with experts singing its praises louder than ever. "Next to

sunscreen, it's the one thing everyone should be using to look younger," proclaims New York City dermatologist Dr. Doris Day.

Not unlike the transformation of bulky flip mobiles into today's sleek smartphones, retinols have advanced dramatically in the past decade. "The initial theory was to make it as strong as possible for the best results, but we realized the irritation was counterproductive," explains Omaha, Nebraska-based dermatologist Dr. Joel Schlessinger. "Now the approach is kinder and gentler but still getting us to the same place."

And that destination is basically complexion heaven, where skin is not only smoother, but also brighter. "Retinols treat more concerns than any other ingredient available," says New York dermatologist Dr. Bruce Katz. With regular use, they improve issues ranging from wrinkles, brown spots, and roughness to acne and pore size.

Here's how it works: When we're young, skin cells rise uniformly through the layers of our complexion to continuously replenish the surface so it appears fresh and plump. As we age, the process becomes disjointed, with certain cells rising out of step with surrounding areas. The result: dullness, wrinkles, and dark spots. Retinol—a term often used generically (and incorrectly) to refer to an entire class of vitamin A forms called retinoids—normalizes this process by converting to retinoic acid, which binds to specific receptors that tell cells to function the way they did back in the day.

If that's not confusing enough, the stuff comes in many variations. Prescription versions contain retinoic acid in its pure pharmaceutical form (which is called tretinoin, if you want to get technical), which goes to work



Retinol has come a long way in the past decade

immediately; over-the-counter products contain gentler, not-yet-converted-to-tretinoin forms, such as retinol, or less potent variations like retinyl acetate and retinyl palmitate.

“What’s tricky is that the companies that make OTC retinol products don’t have to indicate how much of the ingredient is present if it’s less than 1 percent, and that can mean there’s only a sprinkling,” says Dr. Noëlle Sherber, a Washington, D.C., dermatologist. That’s why you may have purchased a so-called retinol cream in the past with only a lighter wallet to show for it. “A quality formula will absolutely produce changes in your skin after a few weeks of regular use,” explains Sherber, who suggests looking for a percentage that is called out on the box (like 0.05 or 0.1 percent retinol) in order to bank on more meaningful results.

Prescription forms are regulated and labeled clearly (Retin-A Micro gel, for example, contains up to 0.1 percent tretinoin), but that doesn’t necessarily mean they’re better than department-store and drugstore products. Day points

out that once a prescription drug goes through FDA approval, the makers can’t change the formulation; they’re essentially “stuck” with what they’ve got and must go through the entire testing and approval process again if they want to tweak or update the formula. Meanwhile, beauty giants like L’Oréal, Estée Lauder, and Procter & Gamble constantly test and change their recipes as they uncover new ways to encapsulate retinol so it’s gentler; they’ll also add other ingredients that make for more user-friendly lotions. “Honestly, some of these formulations work just as well or even better than prescriptions because they’re enjoyable to apply and people use them more consistently, which is key to getting the best results,” says Day.

At this point, you may feel like you need a chemistry degree to understand how to make retinol work for you, but experts say it’s worth finding one you like. Perhaps retinol’s power is best shown through Day’s approach with teenage patients who come in to the office with acne complaints: “I put them on a retinoid to clear up the zits and then tell them to just stay on it forever.” **mc**

APPLY WITH CAUTION

“People tend to think if a little bit is good, a lot is better. This is definitely the wrong approach when it comes to retinol,” says dermatologist Dr. Joel Schlessinger. Here’s the pro-approved way to do it:

SKIP MORNINGS

Most forms of retinol are rendered useless by sunlight.

START SLOWLY

Begin by applying every other night. Irritated skin? Try every third night. After two weeks, increase frequency, building up to every night as your skin acclimates.

APPLY TO CLEAN, DRY SKIN

Damp skin can draw in retinol too quickly, causing irritation. Blend it onto a bare complexion before other products like moisturizers or face oils.

AVOID EYES

Unless yours is specifically formulated for the eye area, avoid lids, browbones, and the sliver of skin just beneath your lower lashlines.

USE SPARINGLY

You only need a pea-size blob of a prescription and about twice that for OTC. It may be difficult to spread such a small amount around, so dot it on quadrants of your face, then go back and rub in.

JUST TELL ME WHAT TO GET

An oversimplified guide to finding the nonprescription retinol that works for you

FOR BEGINNERS

TRY: “Buffered” formulas. These contain (or are applied in conjunction with) hydrators like niacinamide and ceramides that make the retinol less irritating for those with sensitive skin (or for use around the eyes).

1. **PETER THOMAS ROTH** Retinol Fusion Eye Cream, \$55 (available in October).
2. **DERMALOGICA** Age Smart Overnight Retinol Repair (shown) and Buffer Cream, \$85.
3. **CERAVE** Skin Renewing Cream Serum, \$18.



FOR INTERMEDIATES

TRY: Time-release retinol formulas. The active ingredients are delivered over several hours, making these great for normal skin, yet safe enough for skin that’s easily irritated.

4. **AMARTE** Overnight Express Therapy, \$79.
5. **MURAD** Time Release Retinol Concentrate for Deep Wrinkles, \$65.
6. **STRIVECTIN** Advanced Retinol Intensive Night Moisturizer, \$112.



FOR OILY SKIN

TRY: Retinol serums. Because they don’t have the typical creamy base, they’re better for skin that tends to get shiny or is breakout-prone.

7. **SUKI** Radical Results Youth Serum, \$51.
6. **STRIVECTIN** Advanced Retinol Intensive Night Moisturizer, \$112.



FOR NORMAL-TO-DRY SKIN

TRY: Retinol oils. They’re easy to spread around on combination-to-dry skin.

8. **VERSO SKINCARE** Super Facial Oil, \$195 for four vials. For information on where to buy, see Shopping Directory.