



### **EXFOLIATE FIRST**

**"Think of the surface of the epidermis—those dead cells—as a barrier," says dermatologist Amy Wechsler. "You have to remove it for products to get in." This particular barrier is more like a gossamer curtain than a brick wall, however, so go easy.**

**Basic cleansers free up pores by removing dirt and oil, but to truly increase absorption, you'll need an enzyme- or acid-based cleanser, such as Neutrogena Deep Clean Facial Cleanser (ideal for sensitive and acne-prone skin), a grainy scrub with small, smooth particles, like Clinique 7 Day Scrub Cream Rinse-Off Formula, or another type of gentle buffing tool. Try:**

- A skin brush, like the Clarisonic Classic Sonic Skin Cleansing System or the Olay Professional Pro-X Advanced Cleansing System, daily.**

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Written by Egypt Eve

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- **A resurfacing stick (a waxy balm packed with tiny crystals), such as Blinc Resurf-a-stic, one to three times a week.**

### GO IN ORDER

Like South­west Airlines, your skin has a firm first-come-first-serve policy. "Whatever goes on first penetrates best," says dermatologist Jeannette Graf. So whether you're fighting wrinkles, zits, or sun spots, the most active ingredients should be applied first. If you're using two products for two different problems, apply one to bare skin in the morning and the other to bare skin at night so you're guaranteed 100 percent efficacy from both. After treatments are in place, smooth on other items in order of density, from thinnest (antioxidant serum) to thickest (sunscreen or night cream). The exception is retinoids, which could irritate those with sensitive skin if applied first.

### APPLY TO JUST-WASHED SKIN

Damp skin acts like a sponge, quickly absorbing whatever comes its way. (That's damp, not wet.) This rule applies to almost every product—even retinoids. The only exception? Mineral-based sunscreen. "It's not absorbed," says dermatologist David Bank. "It's designed to sit on the surface of the skin and reflect the sun's rays. On damp skin, mineral blocks tend to run, give uneven coverage, and look chalky."

### WARM IT UP

When you wash your face with lukewarm water instead of cold, you raise the skin's temperature slightly, causing blood vessels and pores to dilate in an effort to cool you down. "Space between the cells means there's a greater surface area for absorption, which helps product get in," says dermatologist Heidi Waldorf. Plus, ingredients move through skin and interact with cells more quickly when the skin is warm, says Bank.

### TOP IT OFF

"One of the best ways to boost absorption is to top ingredients with heavy,

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occlusive ointments," says Waldorf. Thick ointments and creams with large amounts of petrolatum, natural butters, oils, and waxes make the best occlusive agents, says cosmetic chemist Jim Hammer. But don't start slapping Vaseline over every product from your medicine cabinet. "I'd never do it with retinoids, acids, vitamin C, or hydroquinone," Wechsler says. "You can essentially double their strength and create lots of irritation." Also, skip this entirely if you're prone to acne.

## SAVE RETINOIDS FOR NIGHTTIME

These line-fighting superheroes do their best work under cover of darkness, because both prescription and over-the-counter versions degrade and weaken in the sun.

Another distinct advantage night has over day: Skin temperature rises by about half a degree while we sleep, because more blood is shunted to the skin, away from internal organs. And with greater warmth and blood-vessel dilation comes better penetration. Says Bank, "Though it's not an enormous difference, your skin does absorb more overnight." This pertains to any ingredient you apply before bed, not just retinoids.

## TRY SERUMS

When you want maximum impact from a fragrance, you buy the parfum, not the scented body wash. Similarly, you'll find the strongest dose of active ingredients in serums—not, say, cleansers. "A serum is a concentrated source of an active ingredient in a simple form that penetrates very quickly and completely, unhindered by lotion-type emollients that make it difficult for actives to sink in," Hammer says. One instance of a serum adding intense moisture: In a company study, Perlier Hydro-Zone Face Cream increased skin hydration 21 percent when used alone. But when combined with Hydro-Zone Face Serum, there was an average increase in skin hydration of 35 percent.

### COMBINE RIGHT

Like Beyoncé and Jay-Z, some ingredients are notable power couples.

"Sunscreen and antioxidants were born to be married," says dermatologist Ranella Hirsch. As the former absorbs UV rays, the latter neutralizes the free radicals created by those rays before they can do damage. If your SPF doesn't include them, layer an antioxidant serum underneath. (Try SkinCeuticals Phloretin CF.) Many antioxidants also complement peptides: "They bolster the skin's ability to protect and heal itself, allowing collagen-building peptides to work better," says Bank. Retinoids and hydroquinone are another dynamic duo—one typically prescribed for the dark splotches of melasma. "They get out pigment in different ways," says Waldorf. Other smart combos exist in the prescription realm—"benzoyl peroxide may enhance the bacteria-killing powers of the topical antibiotic clindamycin," Wechsler says—but this is a tricky topic, so talk to your dermatologist before mixing and matching