

The Essential Guide to

# Exfoliation

Lab Muffin



# Introduction

Welcome to **The Essential Guide to Exfoliation!**

In this guide, you'll find:

- An explanation of why you need to exfoliate
- A comparison of physical and chemical exfoliation
- An overview of the different exfoliants
- Recommendations for starting an exfoliation routine
- Special considerations specific to your skin type

Why exfoliation? Exfoliation is the gateway into a fascinating world of skincare – it's accessible, and it has the ability to make immediate, remarkable changes to your skin. When I saw how adding effective exfoliants to my routine made my skin smooth and glowing, I was hooked! I hope it does the same for you.

Michelle Wong – [labmuffin.com](https://labmuffin.com)

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**For an up-to-date recommended product list with more comprehensive information, click [here](#).**

# Skincare Foundations

Exfoliation is a great addition to your skincare routine, but first you need to sort out your fundamentals: cleanser, moisturiser and sunscreen.

If you're after a comprehensive, science-based guide to building a skincare routine, [The Lab Muffin Guide to Basic Skincare](#) is what you need!

**FIND OUT MORE**



# Why Do I Need to Exfoliate?

The protective outer layer of your skin (the stratum corneum) is made up of dead skin cells and is replaced every 2 weeks. However, this process can be slowed by ageing, hormones, dietary disruptions and changes in weather, causing clogged pores, breakouts, rough patches, wrinkles and dull skin. You can prevent these issues by helping your skin exfoliate.

There are 2 main categories of exfoliation: physical and chemical. They each have their advantages and disadvantages, and can be great when used together. Products in both categories can range from gentle to harsh, so choosing an exfoliation routine that works for your skin is crucial.





# Physical Exfoliation

Physical exfoliation involves buffing away dead skin cells mechanically. It can be harsh or gentle, depending on the tools or scrubbing particles used, and how you move them over your face (how hard you press, how many times you go over the one spot etc.)

## Advantages

- ✓ Immediate results
- ✓ Lower chance of an unexpected allergic or irritant reaction
- ✓ Reusable exfoliating tools are environmentally friendly and economical

## Disadvantages

- ✗ Only works on uppermost skin layers
- ✗ Easy to scrub too hard, leading to damaged and vulnerable overexfoliated skin
- ✗ Scrubbing particles can be messy

Physical exfoliants can be rinse-off products like scrubs and peeling gels, or tools like face cloths, konjac sponges and face brushes.

# Types of Physical Exfoliation

## Scrubs

Scrubs are products containing scrubbing particles which you rub over your face then rinse off. There are scrubs suitable for all skin types, depending on the scrubbing particles.

**Plastic microbeads** (polyethylene, polypropylene, nylon, polymethyl methacrylate): These provide gentle to medium exfoliation. Unfortunately, they're harmful to wildlife. Even if you're not concerned about the environment, it's still a good idea to avoid them – they're being phased out so you'll have to find a replacement soon regardless.

**Jojoba beads** (hydrogenated jojoba oil, jojoba esters): These are translucent white grains made from chemically processed jojoba oil. Jojoba beads are as gentle as microbeads without the environmental consequences.

**Coffee grounds:** Although there isn't enough caffeine in them to reduce cellulite, coffee grounds are an effective and cheap DIY scrub. However, they can be too rough for sensitive skin.

**Apricot kernel:** It's very easy to overexfoliate your face with these large and rough particles. They're more suitable for stubborn rough patches on your body than your face.

**Ground oatmeal:** You can make your own ground oatmeal using a coffee grinder and rolled oats. It softens in water to form a gentle scrub with anti-irritant and hydrating effects from chemicals called avenanthramides in the oatmeal.

**Salt and sugar grains:** A bit harsher than jojoba beads, these can be found in store-bought products as well as DIY scrubs. Larger crystals are rougher, while smaller crystals are gentler. For a gentler version of any salt or sugar scrub, apply to a damp face and let it sit for a minute before scrubbing – the particles will dissolve a little and become smaller and smoother. Since they dissolve, they're also the least messy scrubs available.

### *Product Recommendations*

[Skinfood Black Sugar Mask](#): This mask contains coarse sugar crystals which dissolve slightly in water to form a medium-strength scrub.

DIY: Mix a pinch of sugar or salt with your usual cleanser for a cleansing scrub, with cream or oil (e.g. sunflower) for a moisturising scrub, or water for a simple scrub. You can do the same with ground oatmeal.

[Aveeno Skin Brightening Daily Scrub](#): This has jojoba beads in a foaming cleanser base (note: some versions use plastic microbeads, so check the ingredients before buying).

#### **Extra Tip**

Buffing lightly in small circles for a longer period of time works better than scrubbing hard with a lot of pressure.

## Peeling Gels and Gommages

Peeling gels and gommages are gel-like products that contain cellulose or carbomer, which roll up to form scrubbing fibres when they come into contact with your skin. They're very gentle but thorough exfoliants. Peeling gels are more popular in Asia: Korean skincare brands like Skinfood and The Face Shop have a variety of peeling gels.



### *Product Recommendations*

[Skinfood Pineapple Peeling Gel](#) and [The Face Shop White Jewel Peeling](#): These are both concentrated enough to work effectively in the shower.

[Cure Aqua Gel](#): This is a pricier peeling gel with a cult following.

[e.l.f. Gentle Peeling Exfoliant](#): A budget-friendly Western peeling gel that works best outside of the shower.

### **Extra Tip**

Peeling gels and gommages clump up more effectively with only a little water, and will sometimes be too runny to work well if you use them in the shower.



## Face Cloths

A cotton or muslin facecloth will gently exfoliate. Microfibre will give a more thorough treatment. There are also rough cloths like the Salux washcloth, more suitable for the body.

### *Product Recommendations*

Microfibre cloths: These have a greater surface area than normal face cloths for more thorough cleaning.

#### **Extra Tip**

Wash frequently and dry between uses to prevent bacterial buildup.

## Face Brushes

Face brushes can be a simple brush that you manually move over your face, or they may vibrate or spin with the press of a button. They come with a variety of bristle stiffnesses. Softer bristles exfoliate more gently.

### *Product Recommendations*

Panasonic Micro Foaming Cleansing Device: This excellent brush has a ball attachment that can be used when you want to wash without exfoliating. Cheaper alternatives vary by country.

#### **Extra Tip**

Vibrating brushes are gentler than rotating brushes – make sure you check which one you're buying.

## Konjac Sponges

Konjac sponges are made from a yam and swell up when soaked in water. These exfoliate your skin gently, and can be used alone or with a cleanser.



### *Product Recommendations*

[Ecotools Facial Konjac Sponge](#): There are many konjac sponges available, but I don't recommend spending a lot since they're pretty similar and you'll have to replace it every few months.

#### **Extra Tip**

To sanitise a konjac sponge between uses, place it in a bowl of water and microwave for a minute.

# Physical Exfoliant Comparison

**GENTLE**

**MEDIUM**

**STRONG**

## *Scrubs*

Plastic microbeads

Coffee grounds

Jojoba beads

Raw sugar

Caster sugar

White sugar

Apricot kernel  
(not recommended  
for the face)

Ground oatmeal

Plain salt

## *Peeling Gels*

## *Face Cloths*

Muslin cloth

Microfiber towel

Salux washcloth  
(not recommended  
for the face)

Woven cotton cloth

Terrycloth face towel

## *Face Brushes*

## *Konjac Sponges*

# Chemical Exfoliation

Chemical exfoliation involves applying a product that breaks down dead skin layers so they can come off more easily. Less frequently, they may act as messengers to change how quickly cells are produced (increasing cell turnover). They frequently have additional benefits on top of simply exfoliating.

## Advantages

- ✓ Works more evenly than physical exfoliation
- ✓ Less prone to user error
- ✓ Ingredients often have secondary advantages

## Disadvantages

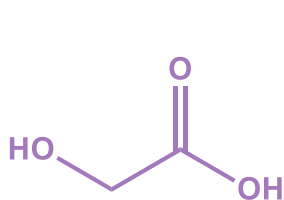
- ✗ Slower to work
- ✗ More difficult to figure out if a product is effective
- ✗ Higher chance of unexpected allergic or irritant reactions
- ✗ Can cause photosensitivity

At the moment, the most common chemical exfoliants in skincare products are hydroxy acids (alpha, beta and poly). Retinoids and enzymes are becoming more common as well.

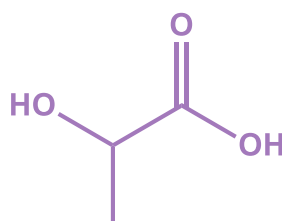
## Hydroxy Acids

Hydroxy acids increase cell renewal and unstick dead skin cells. They include alpha hydroxy acids (AHAs, e.g. glycolic, lactic and malic acids) and beta hydroxy acids (usually referring to salicylic acid only). They go on your skin after cleansing and toning, and before serums and moisturisers.

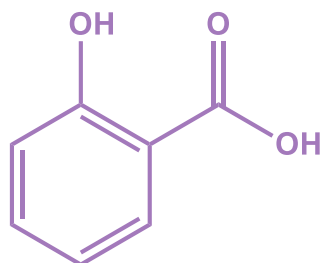
As well as exfoliating, hydroxy acids have other advantages too. AHAs have also been found to even out skin tone and reduce wrinkles, so they are recommended as anti-aging ingredients. Salicylic acid is oil-soluble and antibacterial, so it's often recommended for oily, acne-prone skin since it can penetrate clogged pores more effectively.



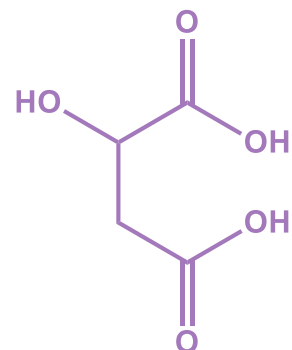
**Glycolic Acid**



**Lactic Acid**



**Salicylic Acid**



**Malic Acid**



Concentration and pH make a big difference to a hydroxy acid's effectiveness. AHAs should be lower than pH 4 to work effectively and at a concentration of 4–10% when you're starting out. It's usually recommended that salicylic acid should be 1–2% and lower than pH 3.5, although a couple of studies has found that it still exfoliates with less irritation at neutral pH (around pH 7). You may need to ask the brand for information on their products' concentrations and pH.

Poly hydroxy acids (PHAs, e.g. lactobionic acid and gluconolactone) are newer hydroxy acid ingredients in skincare which are supposedly less irritating than AHAs and BHA while still remaining effective, although research on them is scarce.

### *Product Recommendations*

[Paula's Choice 8% AHA Gel](#) and [2% BHA Liquid](#): Paula's Choice make fantastically affordable exfoliants formulated with effective pH levels.

[The Ordinary Glycolic Acid 7% Toning Solution](#): This glycolic acid product is suitable once your skin is used to exfoliation and you're looking for something stronger (don't let the low percentage fool you).

#### **Extra Tips**

- AHAs make you burn faster in the sun. Wear sunscreen while you're using AHAs, and for at least a week after you stop.
- Many people find that waiting a few minutes for hydroxy acids to sink in before applying other products gives better results.
- Start with a low percentage and slowly increase the concentration to avoid irritation.

## Retinoids

Retinoids are vitamin A derivatives that are usually used for effects apart from exfoliation, but one of their many actions is to increase skin cell renewal. They're anti-aging superstar ingredients which slow down collagen breakdown and act as antioxidants to soak up cell damage. Retinoids act at very low concentrations, so percentages higher than 2% are usually unnecessarily irritating. Retinol and retinol esters (e.g. retinyl palmitate) are available in stores, while stronger retinoids (tretinoin, adapalene, tazarotene) are prescription-only. They are light and air sensitive, so look for appropriate packaging.

### *Product Recommendations*

[Paula's Choice Clinical 0.3% Retinol + 2% Bakuchiol Treatment](#): This comes in a light- and air-proof pump and contains some other potentially beneficial ingredients too.

[Life Flo Retinol A 1%](#): This is a very budget-friendly retinol product.

[Neutrogena Rapid Wrinkle Repair Regenerating Cream](#): This is a very stable supermarket product that's gentle yet effective.

Prescription retinoids: You'll have to talk to a doctor about getting these prescribed. They're more thoroughly researched and highly effective, but can cause stronger side effects as well.

### **Extra Tip**

Retinoids often break down in light, so they should be used at night only. They are also very irritating and should be used sparingly.

# Enzymes

Protein-digesting enzymes from pineapple (bromelain), papaya (papain), pumpkin and kiwifruit (actinidin) can break the bonds holding dead skin cells together. They come in wash-off products, or you can easily make a DIY mask. They should be rinsed off after 5-15 minutes.

## *Product Recommendations*

DIY: You can mash up fresh pineapple, pumpkin, kiwifruit or papaya to use as a mask. For the ultimate in laziness, I save kiwifruit peels to rub on my face before a shower.

[Bliss Pumpkin Powerhouse Enzyme Mask](#) and [Andalou Naturals Pumpkin Honey Glycolic Mask](#): These masks use pumpkin enzyme for exfoliation.



### **Extra Tip**

Enzymes are heat-sensitive, so if the fruit has been heat-treated it won't work (e.g. the enzymes in canned pineapple are inactive).

# Recommendations

## General Tips

- It's much better to underexfoliate than overexfoliate. Err on the side of caution when starting a new product.
- Start exfoliating once a week and increase frequency if it looks like it's working well. For most people, with most exfoliants, using a new exfoliant once a day will be too much at first.
- You can use more than one exfoliant in your routine, but new products should be introduced one at a time, a few weeks apart to see if they're doing anything, and if your skin can handle them.
- Watch out for overexfoliation – if your skin is sensitive, red, tight and shiny, your exfoliation routine is too intense. Take a break for a few days to let your skin recover and reform a sufficiently thick protective layer, then start again, slowly.
- Patch test leave-on products before incorporating them into your routine, especially if you have sensitive skin.

## Recommendations by Skin Type and Condition

All skin types can benefit from physical and chemical exfoliation, but be careful not to exfoliate too much.

### **Dry skin**

Don't be tempted to use harsh scrubs to remove dry flakes – you'll damage your skin and make it flake more! Start with one gentle physical exfoliation method a week. Introduce a chemical exfoliant every second day after 2 weeks. Oatmeal and AHAs are particularly good as they are humectant (water-holding) and can provide extra moisturisation. Introduce any retinoids slowly due to their drying effects. Make sure you moisturise after exfoliating!

e.g. Oatmeal and oil scrub twice a week, add 8% AHA after 2 weeks.

### **Dehydrated skin**

If your skin feels tight, you likely have dehydrated skin that lacks water. Like dry skin, dehydrated skin can benefit from water-holding oatmeal and AHAs. Moisturising after exfoliating is important too.

e.g. Microfibre cloth once a week, add 2% salicylic acid 2 weeks.

### **Sensitive skin**

Start with one gentle physical exfoliation method per week. Introduce a chemical exfoliation method every second day after 2 weeks. Only increase this to every day if your skin does not react badly. Don't forget sunscreen!

e.g. Oatmeal and water scrub every Monday. Add 4% AHA on Thursday after second oatmeal scrub.



### **Oily skin**

Start with a gentle-medium physical exfoliation method once per week. Introduce daily salicylic acid after 2 weeks. If you want more exfoliation, try adding another chemical exfoliant, such as an AHA or retinoid.

e.g. Start with a microfibre cloth twice weekly, add 2% salicylic acid after the second week.

### **Aged skin**

Retinoids and AHAs are particularly good for wrinkles and hyperpigmentation, with clinical trials to back up their anti-wrinkle and complexion-improving effects. However, both can be irritating so they should be introduced slowly.

e.g. Start with 0.5% retinol cream every second evening. Add 8% glycolic acid on alternating evenings after 2 weeks if skin is not irritated. Wear sunscreen daily.

### **Acne-prone skin**

Acne-prone skin requires gentle care as irritation can cause inflammation which makes breakouts worse. Salicylic acid and retinoids are particularly good for acne-prone skin because on top of exfoliating, they have other anti-acne actions too.

e.g. Start with 0.5% retinol cream every second evening. Add 2% salicylic acid on alternating evenings after 2 weeks if skin is not irritated. Wear sunscreen daily.

## Further Reading

For more advanced information, you may find these blog posts helpful:

- [Exfoliation basics](#)
- [All about physical exfoliants](#)
- [All about chemical exfoliants](#)
- [Choosing an exfoliant](#)
- [Why pH matters for hydroxy acids](#)
- [AHAs vs BHA](#)
- [Why plastic microbeads are bad](#)
- [How makeup removing cloths work](#)
- [Do peeling gels peel off skin?](#)
- [How enzyme exfoliants work](#)
- [Starting on chemical peels](#)
- [Sun protection and hydroxy acids](#)

If you found this guide useful, you might also be interested in [The Lab Muffin Guide to Basic Skincare](#). It goes through everything you need to know about choosing and using the cornerstone products of your skincare routine: cleanser, sunscreen and moisturiser.

**FIND OUT MORE**

These products aren't usually the ones we look at when we think "amazing skin", but experienced skincare addicts know that these products are the most important to get right!

It also includes a guide to assessing your skin, building a routine, and understanding marketing terms and controversial ingredients. I've put all my best skincare tips in there.



## What People Are Saying

"I wish I came across this book years ago before I started abusing my skin. It's a condensed version that has every lesson I learned over the years."

**Liah Yoo, Skincare YouTuber and Founder of KraveBeauty**

"A very informative and easy-to-read eBook! "Sneaky Marketing Terms" was one of my favourite parts, it is really good to have a breakdown of all the terms that have been used so widely to advertise products that may seem misleading for consumers. This would be a fantastic eBook if you're looking to learn more about your products, what's in them and how to find your best match."

**Lily of Lily Not Louise**

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# Thank You for Reading!

For more science-based beauty tips:



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