

Beauty | February 28, 2022

SELF's Comprehensive Skin-Care Routine Guide

Here's everything you'd ever want to know.

By [Sarah Jacoby](#) and [Mara Santilli](#)

Reviewed by [Michele S. Green, MD](#)



Photo: Felicity Ingram; Wardrobe: Ronald Burton; Hair: Jerome Cultrera at L'Atelier; Makeup: Porsche

All products featured on SELF are independently selected by our editors. However, when you buy something through our retail links, we may earn an affiliate commission.

During these unpredictable pandemic times (after which the word “uncertainty” will be triggering for years) one thing has remained constant in many of our lives: a [skin-care](#) routine. Maybe yours is modeled after an influencer’s 11-step regimen, or you’re more of a wash, rinse, repeat person. Perhaps your skin-care routine has stayed exactly the same as pre-pandemic, or you’ve added additional steps, like a weekly mask or nightly serum for some extra self care. Or, it could be that you’re here to find out the best order of skin-care products once and for all (you’re in luck).

The truth is that each skin-care routine is necessarily as unique and individual as the person following it (or attempting to, anyway). But as skin care has become trendier on social media and thousands of new products have been released in recent years (containing seemingly every ingredient under the sun), it’s also gotten a little more intimidating and confusing for a beginner to get started—and for anyone to understand how to create an effective skin-care routine that works for them.

That’s where we come in. As you begin (or continue) your skin-care quest, we hope to answer as many of your questions as we can here in this skin-care 101 guide—with the help of research and experts rather than hype. Read on to find out everything you’ve ever wanted to know about all the potential skin-care routine steps and ingredients, including what you should keep in mind based on your skin type and any health conditions you may have.

Here's how to use this guide: If you're brand-new to the idea of a skin-care routine, it helps to start at the very beginning, where we answer your most basic questions about skin care—even the ones you may be too embarrassed to ask all your skin-care-savvy friends. If you've dabbled in skin care and just really want to know what ingredients might be right for you, we've got you too. Scroll down to learn more about the actual elements in a skin-care routine and get an overview of active ingredients that work best for certain skin conditions. We also have specific sections for skin of color, what to do if you're pregnant, and what to keep in mind if you have a diagnosed condition that affects your skin. Plus we break down some often confusing aspects of the skin-care industry, such as whether or not the [Food and Drug Administration \(FDA\)](#) regulates skin-care ingredients and what exactly manufacturers mean when they call their products “natural” or “clean.”

In each section, you'll find links to all our coverage on that topic, so make sure you click on anything that piques your interest if you want to learn even more.

And lastly, don't forget to check out our [glossary of popular skin-care terms](#), which can help clear up any lingering confusion you have.

Let's get started!

What do you mean when you say “skin care”? | Why should I care about skin care? | What do I need to know before I begin a skin-care routine? | What are the basic steps of a skin-care routine? | How do I address a specific skin issue? | How do I know which active ingredients are right for my skin? | What else should I know about skin-care ingredients? | Is there anything I need to know about caring for my skin of color? | What products are safe for pregnant people? | What if I have a medical condition that affects my skin? | What about “clean” beauty? | Which products do you like best?

What do you really mean when you say “skin care”?

We mean the basic care and keeping of your largest organ—your skin! It plays an important role in protecting you from outside pathogens and, you know, holds all your internal organs in place (phew). And in the same way that you regularly brush your teeth, your skin requires at least some attention to keep it functioning properly.

It also requires protection—especially from [skin cancer](#). At SELF, when we talk about skin care we're talking about science-backed ways to improve both the look and function of your skin to address and manage both cosmetic and medical concerns.

This guide is for anyone who is curious about what it means or what it takes to have an effective skin-care routine—from beginners who don't know where to start all the way to seasoned skin-care enthusiasts. Consider it your ultimate skin-care manual.

[Back to top](#)

Photo: Felicity Ingram; Wardrobe: Ronald Burton; Hair: Jerome Cultrera at L'Atelier; Makeup: Porsche Cooper; Manicure: Yukie Miyakawa at Walter Schupfer

Why should I care about skin care?

Yes, caring about skin care might be quite trendy these days, especially with beauty influencers demoing everything from facial steaming to jade rolling on social media, but no matter what, giving your skin some love has both cosmetic and medical benefits. For instance, although you can't slow down the passage of time, with a finely tuned skin-care regimen you can reduce the appearance of fine lines, wrinkles, dark spots, and sun damage. You can also quite effectively manage some more minor skin concerns, such as dryness or oiliness, with face care products.

For those with specific skin conditions such as psoriasis, eczema, rosacea, and acne, skin care isn't always optional and requires a bit more thought about ingredients that will be safe for your skin. For one, treating a specific skin condition often means you need to employ a particular skin-care regimen, and for another, your condition may make your skin more sensitive to ingredients and products in general. Finding a skin-care routine that works can offer a vital way for someone to manage and treat their condition.

There's also the fact that many people find their skin-care routines offer some mental health benefits—having that routine may help you realize just how easy it can be to do nice things for your body and build healthy habits. "A consistent, healthy routine is important for establishing rhythm and order in our lives," [Corey L. Hartman, M.D.](#), founder of [Skin Wellness Dermatology](#) and assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the [University of Alabama School of Medicine](#), tells SELF. "Whether the routine is skin care, exercise, meditation, or any other beneficial activity, the dedication to the method can bring grounding to our everyday lives, which can often feel chaotic and uncontrolled."

Some people may also find that going through their routine or even applying the occasional mask relaxes them and helps them focus their attention on themselves, maybe for the only time in their day. Two great examples of this are "[Why I Embraced Skin Care After My Mother's Death](#)" and "[How Skin Care Became a Crucial Part of My Sobriety Toolbox](#)," personal essays we've published in recent years.

That said, some skin-care companies make a lot of big claims about what their products can do without necessarily having the evidence to back them up. At SELF, our aim is to help you make the most informed decision before buying or trying a product and to guide you toward the treatment options we know the most about.

[Back to top](#)

I'm ready to start a skin-care routine. What do I need to know before I begin?

Before figuring out what to include in your skin-care routine, it's important to know your skin type and if you have any major concerns you want to address. It's also good to remember that everyone's regimen is individual—what works for your friends, family, or randos online may not be best for you.

To figure out your skin type, think about how your skin acts without any makeup or products on it a few hours after taking a shower. If it gets a little greasy or shiny, you probably have oily skin. "If you tend to have eczema and your skin gets really dry in the cold winter months, then gravitating toward skin care for more sensitive, dry skin is best," [Sandy Skotnicki, M.D.](#), founder of [Bay Dermatology Centre](#) and assistant professor of dermatology the [University of Toronto](#), tells SELF. "Most people have a combination, with oily areas around the nose and chin in a typical pattern," she adds. It might also be possible that you don't have any of these types, which means most skin-care products will be safe to use on your skin. Knowing your skin type will help steer you toward products that will manage dryness and oiliness while effectively taking care of any other skin concerns you have.

You don't necessarily need to see a dermatologist before starting a skin-care routine. But if you have sensitive skin (or aren't sure if your skin qualifies as sensitive), if you have a skin condition, or if you're trying to address any major concerns (such as stubborn or severe acne or hyperpigmentation), it's important to check in with a [board-certified dermatologist](#) who can guide you through the process.

Here are some great articles that can help you before you begin a skin-care routine:

- [How to Know If You Should See an Esthetician or a Dermatologist](#)
- [How Bad Is It to Switch Up Your Skin-Care Products All the Time?](#)
- [How to Wash Your Face for Clearer, Healthier Skin](#)
- [Ask a Beauty Editor: Why Is My Skin Always Oily Halfway Through the Day No Matter What?](#)

[Back to top](#)

Photo: Felicity Ingram; Wardrobe: Ronald Burton; Hair: Jerome Cultrera at L'Atelier; Makeup: Porsche Cooper; Manicure: Yukie Miyakawa at Walter Schupfer

Okay, got it. So what are the basic steps of a skin-care routine?

Skin care doesn't have to be complicated if you don't want it to be, but in general there is an ideal skin-care routine order that helps ensure the products you use will be most effective. The three basic skin-care routine steps are cleansing, moisturizing, and applying sunscreen (look for at least SPF 30 and "broad spectrum" on the label). Your morning skin-care routine should include those basics: washing with a cleanser, slathering on a moisturizer, then putting on your sunscreen, says Dr. Skotnicki. Pro tip: You can use a moisturizer that has at least 30 SPF and broad-spectrum protection to combine those two steps.

When it comes to choosing a sunscreen you have options of physical sunscreens or chemical sunscreens. "Chemical sunscreens have ingredients like avobenzone that absorb the sun's rays like a sponge, then release them in the form of heat," Dr. Skotnicki explains. Physical sunscreens,

or mineral sunscreens, have mineral ingredients, like zinc oxide or titanium oxide, and form a barrier that blocks the sun's rays.

You can use either type of sunscreen as long as you're consistent, [Hysem Eldik, M.D.](#), a board-certified dermatologist at [Marmur Medical](#) in New York City, tells SELF. Some people might find that most mineral sunscreens don't blend well with their skin tone and/or makeup, though, so it may take some trial and error to find the right one for you.

Your night skin-care routine, on the other hand, might include additional steps. If you wear heavy makeup or sunscreen during the day, you may find that your cleanser doesn't get all your makeup off or still leaves you feeling kind of greasy. In that case, you might benefit from double cleansing, a process in which you wash first with an oil-based cleanser followed by a water-based cleanser or micellar water on a cotton pad to remove anything left behind. But double cleansing is not a requirement, don't worry.

After cleansing, it's time to apply any serums, toners, [face exfoliators](#), or prescription treatments, depending on your skin concerns or goals. Then, you'll want to seal these middle skin-care routine steps with a moisturizer. You can use a daytime moisturizer with SPF at night, too, although you may find that a thicker product is more moisturizing and better suited to nighttime use because you don't need to worry about being able to put makeup over it—plus, you don't need to be concerned about SPF while you're sleeping.

If you're feeling [trendy](#), you might finish off your skin-care routine with a facial oil as your moisturizer (or on top of it). But just be careful with that, especially if your skin tends to be oily. "Although oils can provide superior hydration, they can come at the cost of clogging pores," Dr. Eldik says. In that case, hydrating oil-free serums containing ingredients like hyaluronic acid and squalane might be a better formula for you. If you don't have oily or acne-prone skin at all, however, a facial oil might work well for you and you may prefer that texture to a thicker cream or lotion moisturizer.

Read more about the basic steps of a skin-care routine:

- [Your Skin-Care Routine Actually Only Needs These Three Things](#)
- [Here's Exactly How and When to Use 5 Basic Skin-Care Staples](#)
- [Is Double Cleansing Truly Worth Your Precious Time?](#)
- [How to Find a Moisturizer That Won't Leave Your Face a Greasy Mess](#)
- [How to Pick the Best Sunscreen for Your Lovely Face](#)
- [How Much Does the Order You Apply Your Skin-Care Products Actually Matter?](#)

Back to top

Sounds doable. But I also want to address a specific skin issue. How do I do that?

This is where products that contain specific active ingredients—known as just “actives” by skin-care enthusiasts—come in. Active ingredients are chemicals or compounds in face care products that are actually treating your skin for the concern the product is supposed to treat it for. For example, if you buy a product to help treat your acne, the active ingredient is the ingredient doing most of the work to clear up your acne.

Some actives may be broken out on a product label in a drug-facts box because they’re regulated more tightly by the (FDA). But in general, the FDA doesn’t test cosmetic skin-care products for safety or efficacy, so we don’t really know how well they work most of the time. That’s why there’s always some trial and error inherent in figuring out a skin-care routine for your specific skin.

The use of most actives is based on some research though, so we have at least a theory about what they can do and how well they do it.

Read more about active ingredients:

- [What Exactly Are ‘Actives’ in Skin-Care Products?](#)
- [Here’s How to Build Your Tolerance to Irritating Skin-Care Products](#)
- [How to Care for Your Angry Skin After an Allergic Reaction on Your Face](#)

[Back to top](#)

Photo: Felicity Ingram; Wardrobe: Ronald Burton; Hair: Jerome Cultrera at L'Atelier; Makeup: Porsche Cooper; Manicure: Yukie Miyakawa at Walter Schupfer. On model: Bodysuit by Alix. Earrings by Lady Grey.

Great. So how do I know which active ingredients are right for my skin?

Picking the right active ingredients depends on the specific skin concerns you're hoping to address. Here are a few of the most common issues:

Signs of aging

Some common signs of aging include photodamage dark spots, fine lines, wrinkles, and sagging skin.

Ingredients

Ceramides: Ceramides are intercellular lipids, meaning they fill in the spaces between your skin cells in the stratum corneum (the outer protective layer of skin). Your skin already makes ceramides on its own—without them, your skin won't be able to effectively hold moisture in or keep irritants out. Topical ceramides may be present in both prescription treatments for eczema and over-the-counter products.

Niacinamide: This is a form of vitamin B3 (niacin) that can be applied to the skin. There is some research to suggest that it can be helpful for managing acne, rosacea, and signs of aging including hyperpigmentation, fine lines, and wrinkles.¹

Peptides: Peptides are known as the building blocks of proteins. They're made up of short chains of amino acids. In the realm of skin care, we mostly talk about peptides as building up collagen, a protein your skin needs to keep its structure. Different types of peptides might do the job of bolstering your collagen in different ways, but the most common ones are signal peptides, which can both stimulate the skin's collagen production, especially overnight, and slow down the natural breakdown of collagen.

Retinoids: These compounds—retinol, retinal (or retinaldehyde), retinoic acid, and synthetic retinoids like Adapalene and Tazerac—are one of only two proven ways to prevent the signs of aging. (The other is sunscreen!) Retinoids, which are forms of vitamin A, work by stimulating the skin-cell-shedding process from below, leading to smoother skin and a reduction in both signs of aging and acne.

These come in both prescription and over-the-counter products, typically with a concentration of 1%, so if you aren't satisfied with the results of an over-the-counter option, check with a dermatologist about getting a prescription version. If you're using it to address signs of aging like fine lines, Dr. Skotnicki recommends starting to use retinol products around age 30 to get ahead of the game. Retinoids are also notorious for causing irritation when you first start using them, so it's crucial to apply them just a few days a week to start with and to apply a moisturizer right after using them.

Sunscreen: You've likely used a sunscreen before to prevent sunburns, which are one form of UV damage. But did you know that UV rays can also contribute to other kinds of damage? And

that damage can cause dark spots, wrinkles, and other signs of aging? It's true. Preventing that—and skin cancer, of course—is a major reason to use sunscreen every single day. Be sure to use a sunscreen that's at least SPF 30 and provides broad-spectrum protection, meaning it protects against both UVA and UVB rays. Although the sunscreen in your makeup doesn't count as your daily SPF, the sunscreen in your moisturizer can—as long as you use it on your ears and neck as well as your face.

Vitamin C: Yes, that vitamin C! This vitamin is essential for producing collagen and other important compounds in the body. And when it's applied topically it can function as an antioxidant, thus preventing UV-related damage. It can also inhibit the production of melanin (pigment) in the skin, making it a good option for lightening dark spots due to photoaging or other kinds of damage. But beware that all forms of vitamin C are not created equal—some are more or less effective or stable than others. You should incorporate vitamin C at a concentration of about 10% in order for it to be effective at fighting sun damage, Dr. Skotnicki says. Also know that vitamin C often appears on the label as these derivatives: look for ingredients such as magnesium ascorbyl phosphate, ascorbyl 6-palmitate, ascorbic acid sulfate, or **L-ascorbic acid** (also referred to simply as ascorbic acid).

More on ingredients for aging:

- [Can People With Sensitive Skin Be in the Retinoid Club Too?](#)
- [The Best Antioxidants for Skin, According to Dermatologists](#)
- [What Niacinamide Can—and Can't—Do for Your Skin](#)
- [The 8 Best Retinol Creams, According to Dermatologists](#)
- [Why Just About Everyone Should Think About Using a Ceramide Cream](#)
- [Ask a Beauty Editor: What Do I Need to Look for in a Vitamin C Serum?](#)

Acne

Although it's very common, acne is a lot more complicated than most of us realize. For instance, there are different types of pimples (whiteheads, blackheads, et cetera), which may be inflamed

(red, swollen, painful) or not. Acne can also be influenced by many factors in your life, such as your hormones. So if your acne is severe or if your over-the-counter treatment options aren't helping, it's important to see a dermatologist who may be able to prescribe you something more effective.

You may come across over-the-counter acne treatment products or other skin-care and cosmetic products that have "non-comedogenic" on the label. That's because the technical term for a pore is a "comedone," Dr. Eldik says, and acne is the result of a clogged pore. "Any product that irritates or clogs the pores can stimulate the cascade of acne," he explains. So basically, the goal if you're acne-prone is to avoid thick makeup, sunscreen, or lotion products that might clog your pores—look for that "non-comedogenic" wording on the product packaging.

A note on fungal acne: *Fungal acne* is a colloquial term for a type of yeast infection that inflames the hair follicles on your skin. The actual name for this condition is either pityrosporum folliculitis or malassezia folliculitis, depending on whom you're talking to. It causes red bumps and pustules that might look like acne, but don't usually affect the face. Unlike actual acne, so-called fungal acne is treated with antifungal medications. So if you're not sure what type of bumps you're dealing with or your usual acne treatments don't seem to be helping, talk to a dermatologist to see if you might be dealing with a fungal issue instead.

Ingredients

Azelaic acid: A type of acid synthesized by yeast, barley, and wheat that's believed to have a gentle exfoliating effect. Research has shown that it's effective at managing both acne and acne-like bumps that are a common symptom of rosacea.² It comes in prescription and over-the-counter forms.

Benzoyl peroxide: Unlike salicylic acid, benzoyl peroxide can kill the type of bacteria that's often responsible for inflamed acne. That's why it's often recommended to use both benzoyl peroxide and salicylic acid to help manage mild to moderate acne. For more severe acne, a retinoid or other prescription treatment may be necessary. Both salicylic acid and benzoyl peroxide can also irritate or dry out skin, so it's important to also use a moisturizer when you're using these ingredients.

Chemical exfoliants: You may already be familiar with physical exfoliants such as **scrubs** and brushes. And while those are perfectly effective at removing dead skin that can clog pores, they're not exactly gentle. That's why many dermatologists recommend their patients stick with chemical exfoliants for facial skin, which include both alpha hydroxy acids, or AHAs (such as lactic acid and glycolic acid), and beta hydroxy acids, or BHAs (essentially just salicylic acid).

"AHAs are water-soluble and help peel away the top surface of the skin, making it smoother. BHA is oil-soluble and penetrates deeper into the pores to remove dead skin cells and excess sebum," Dr. Skotnicki says.

Rather than physically scrubbing the dead skin cells off your face, these chemicals break down the bonds between those cells so that you can easily wipe them away. They're present in all kinds of products, including cleansers, toners, masks, and serums. Just note that you're essentially using a peel, so you won't want to apply products containing AHAs or BHAs on the same night as a retinol product to combat acne. "They're irritating, so using both on the same day can lead to dryness and redness," points out Dr. Skotnicki.

Niacinamide (see above)

Retinoids (see above)

More on how to treat acne:

- [What to Do When Your Skin Is Freaking Out From Retinol](#)
- [Why So Many People Swear By Azelaic Acid to Combat Acne and Redness](#)
- [12 Common Face 'Bumps' and How to Deal With Them](#)
- [How to Get Rid of Blackheads on Your Nose, Chin, and Forehead](#)
- [The Acne-Prevention Strategies Glasses-Wearers Need to Know](#)
- [Here's How to Tell If Your Skin-Care Products Are Actually Non-Comedogenic](#)
- [Everything You Need to Know About Fungal Acne, Including How to Treat It](#)

Scars and discoloration/hyperpigmentation

For some people, scars are almost a badge of honor or a physical mark that shows you endured an intense event. But others would rather not have them hanging around. And if you're trying to minimize the appearance of a scar, the first thing to know is that you'll have to be patient—and especially skeptical.

Types

- **Contracture scar:** Though uncommon, these painful scars—which cause the skin to tighten—can develop after a large area of skin is damaged or lost (typically due to a burn).
- **Depressed (or atrophic) scar:** Typically caused by chicken pox and acne, these marks sit below the skin's surface—usually on facial skin—and have an indented appearance.
- **Flat scar (cicatrix):** These scars tend to be slightly raised at first, but eventually flatten. They may end up slightly darker or lighter than your skin tone.
- **Keloids:** These are larger, often dark raised scars that most commonly form after skin is cut—from an injury, surgery incision, or piercing, for example—and are more likely to affect people with darker skin tones.
- **Raised (or hypertrophic) scar:** Yep, these firm scars rise above the surface of your skin, though they tend to flatten over time.
- **Stretch marks:** You're likely pretty familiar with them already because they exist on many bodies, but stretch marks are a type of scar that typically forms when skin grows or shrinks quickly. This could be during pregnancy, weight fluctuations, or any other changes in your body.

Over-the-counter topical scar treatments don't have a ton of evidence behind them, unfortunately. What does work? Moisturizing—almost to an excessive degree—and time. If that doesn't help, you should chat with a dermatologist about your other options, which may include prescription topical treatments or laser treatments.

When it comes to dark spots, melasma (a skin condition that involves dark or brown spotting on the face), or other hyperpigmentation concerns, though, you can try brightening ingredients, like vitamin C and hydroquinone. “Just be sure to correctly identify the source of the hyperpigmentation first,” Dr. Hartman says. Inflammation is a major cause of hyperpigmentation, for example, so “it is important to determine the best way to control the inflammation that’s driving the hyperpigmentation in the first place,” according to Dr. Hartman. And that might require a visit to your health care provider to get to the bottom of the inflammation.

Ingredients:

Sunscreen: Prevents dark spots from getting darker (see more above). **Emerging research suggests** that visible light, including light that comes from our devices like phones and laptops, may be a factor in exacerbating hyperpigmentation, especially melasma. That's where sunscreen

comes into play, even if you're staying inside all day. "If you're treating hyperpigmentation and not wearing consistent daily sunscreen, you're getting in your own way and not adequately addressing the problem," Dr. Hartman says.

Some experts recommend that people trying to manage those issues look for mineral sunscreens, which help block visible light, in addition to other SPF ingredients.

Hydroquinone: Often considered the gold standard of brightening ingredients, hydroquinone decreases the ability of melanocytes, the cells that produce pigment, to produce melanin. It's available over-the-counter (at concentrations of up to 2%) and via prescription in higher strengths.

Chemical exfoliants: (see above)

Retinoids: (see above)

Vitamin C: (see above)

Read more about treating skin with scars and discoloration:

- [8 Dark Spot Treatments That Really Work, According to Dermatologists](#)
- [Ask a Beauty Editor: How Long Does It Take for Topical Scar Creams to Actually Work?](#)

Dry and sensitive skin

Dry skin also tends to be sensitive, and dry skin can also be a symptom of skin conditions that make the skin more sensitive, like eczema. So products for dry skin are often suitable for sensitive skin as well—but not always.

If you have sensitive skin (meaning you are prone to irritation or allergic reactions or have a skin condition like eczema, psoriasis, or rosacea), it's especially important to be aware that products containing things like fragrance chemicals are more likely to cause a reaction. It's also a good

idea to patch test any new product on your inner arm for a day or two before using it all over your face.

Ingredients:

Bakuchiol: Bakuchiol is a plant extract that some early research suggests can have a beneficial effect on skin, particularly with regard to managing signs of aging, without irritation.³ It's often called a "natural retinol alternative," although it doesn't have quite as much evidence behind it. But experts say bakuchiol may be a good option—especially if your skin is too sensitive for retinoids. If your skin can't tolerate retinol at 1%, try bakuchiol, Dr. Skotnicki says. "It's been shown to have similar effectiveness to retinol at 0.5%, with less irritation," she adds.

Colloidal oatmeal: Colloidal oatmeal is made from grinding oats and mixing them with water or other liquid, which creates a mixture that can provide a soothing, protective barrier on the skin. Experts recommend it specifically for dry and sensitive skin, including skin that's actively irritated, in which the skin's natural barrier may need some extra help.

Hyaluronic acid: Hyaluronic acid is found naturally in the skin and acts as a humectant, meaning it can draw moisture into the skin; products with these molecules allow moisture to bind to the skin without feeling greasy or heavy.

Squalane oil: Squalane is a light moisturizing oil that mimics a component of sebum, the oily substance our skin produces. There is limited research on the effect of topical squalane on skin, but in general, it acts like an emollient when applied, which means that it can squeeze into the spaces between skin cells and make your face feel smoother and more moisturized without being too heavy or occlusive.⁴

Ceramides: (see above)

Niacinamide: (see above)

Read more on treating sensitive skin:

- [7 Derm-Approved Tips to Make Life With Sensitive Skin a Little Bit Easier](#)
- [9 Hyaluronic Acid Products Dermatologists Always Recommend for Hydrated Skin](#)
- [What the Heck Is Squalane Oil and Why Is It in All My Skin-Care Products Now?](#)
- [Centella Asiatica: What It Can Really Do for People With Sensitive Skin](#)
- [Here's What Niacinamide Can—and Can't—Do for Your Skin](#)
- [Can People With Sensitive Skin Be in the Retinoid Club Too?](#)
- [19 Gentle Exfoliators Dermatologists Recommend for Sensitive Skin](#)

- Meet PHAs, the Chemical Exfoliants Your Sensitive Skin Might Just Love

Back to top

Morgan Johnson

There are so many kinds of skin-care products on the market, it's hard to know what works and what's hype. What else should I know about skin-care ingredients before I get started?

As we mentioned above, cosmetic skin-care ingredients don't go through FDA testing before they hit the market, so we don't have data on how effective or safe each over-the-counter product is. Many companies make claims about their products based on the ingredients that are in the product, which may or may not be similar to the ingredients used in scientific research.

Basically, unless you're using a prescription treatment, it's tough to know what you're actually getting when, so it always pays to weigh the potential risks and benefits before putting something new on your skin. Your best bet is to spend money on products containing active ingredients with the most promising research behind them.

In general, the risks include irritation, allergic reactions, or simply wasting time and money. But if you have sensitive skin or a skin condition, you're more likely to experience those kinds of adverse reactions, so you'll want to be more careful when trying new products, especially trendy new ingredients that don't have a lot of solid evidence for their claims. If in doubt, you can always check with a dermatologist.

More about trendy skin-care ingredients and the actual science behind them:

- [What Tea Tree Oil Can and Can't Do for Your Skin](#)
- [Can Any Skin-Care Products Actually 'Detox' Your Face?](#)
- [What You Should Know Before Using a Trendy New Face Oil](#)
- [I Washed My Face With Manuka Honey for a Week—Here's What Happened](#)
- [Does Face Mist Actually Do Anything for Your Skin?](#)
- [Do Collagen Creams and Supplements Actually Do Anything?](#)
- [Is There Literally Any Reason for CBD to Be in Your Skin-Care Products?](#)
- [What's the Actual Deal With Skin Toners and Essences?](#)
- [Caffeine Doesn't Really 'Wake Up' Your Skin—But It Might Do Something Else](#)
- [Your Vulva Doesn't Need Skin-Care Products](#)
- [Here's What Dry Brushing Your Skin Actually Does—And Doesn't Do](#)

[Back to top](#)

Photo: Felicity Ingram; Wardrobe: Ronald Burton; Hair: Jerome Cultrera at L'Atelier; Makeup: Porsche Cooper; Manicure: Yukie Miyakawa at Walter Schupfer

Is there anything in particular I need to know about caring for my skin of color?

People with melanin-rich skin are generally more susceptible to skin issues involving hyperpigmentation, such as melasma and post-acne dark spots. You may also be more likely to develop scarring or hyperpigmentation after inflammatory skin issues, like acne, psoriasis, or eczema.

That can be frustrating because treating pigmentation concerns in darker skin is often somewhat challenging with treatments that are commonly used on white skin, like [laser treatments](#). But laser treatment techniques have advanced a lot in recent years, and in the hands of an experienced practitioner they can be safely used in patients with skin of color. Additionally, [topical treatments](#) containing things like hydroquinone and vitamin C can help too. But

whatever you do, know that treating hyperpigmentation takes time—possibly six months to a year.

There's also a prevalent myth that people with darker skin don't need to wear **sunscreen**—this is definitely not true! The sun can still cause damage even if you're not getting sunburned. And that damage can both lead to skin cancer and exacerbate hyperpigmentation. When shopping for sunscreen, don't necessarily avoid mineral sunscreen if you have a deeper skin tone. "There are many great mineral sunscreen options that don't leave a white cast behind on darker skin tones," Dr. Hartman says. "I like the protection that they confer and the significant reduction in occurrences of irritation."

Some mineral sunscreens to try:



Target

Versed Guards Up Daily Mineral Sunscreen Broad Spectrum SPF 35

\$22 AT TARGET

\$25 AT AMAZON



Biossance

Biossance Squalane + Zinc Sheer Mineral Sunscreen

\$30 AT BIOSSANCE

\$30 AT AMAZON

Sunscreen isn't the only thing you should keep in your skin-cancer-preventing toolbox. People with darker skin tones are more likely to be diagnosed with certain types of melanoma at later stages than those with lighter skin. That's partially because medical textbooks and clinical trials have historically centered on light skin, resulting in a lower public awareness of the risk of skin cancer for people of color. But also, a rare form of melanoma called acral-lentiginous melanoma is more prevalent in people with deeper skin tones. It's more likely to appear in areas that get little sun and that you wouldn't normally check, like the palms, bottoms of the feet, and under fingernails. It's important to check your skin regularly, particularly more hidden areas like the top of your head, nails, and the bottom of your feet for dark spots or sores that won't heal.

If you have any questions about how to care for your skin of color or about managing an issue like melasma, your best bet is to talk to a dermatologist.

More on caring for skin of color:

- [5 Things People of Color Should Know About Taking Care of Their Skin](#)
- [Why Are Black People Less Likely to Get Melanoma but More Likely to Die From It?](#)
- [I Desperately Tried to Find a 'Cure' for My Undereye Circles—Until I Realized They're Genetic](#)
- [What You Should Know About Melasma, Those Random Dark Spots on Your Face](#)

[Back to top](#)

I'm pregnant. What products can I use and what should I avoid?

When you're pregnant, you might notice many changes in your skin, such as pregnancy-related acne, a hormonal effect of excess oil production, or, even more commonly, hyperpigmentation. Melasma affects 15 to 50% of pregnant people. "Hormones seen with pregnancy, birth control use, menopause, and hormone replacement therapy may stimulate the pigment-producing cells in the skin called melanocytes to over-produce melanin, resulting in the condition," [Adeline Kikam, D.O.](#), board-certified dermatologist, tells SELF.

Before you treat any skin concerns related to pregnancy, it's important to check the ingredients on product labels. If you're pregnant or breastfeeding, you may need to temporarily stop using certain products, especially certain acne products. According to the [American Academy of Dermatology](#) (AAD), pregnant people should definitely avoid using retinoids including isotretinoin, tretinoin, tazarotene, spironolactone, and adapalene. "They can affect the development of the ectoderm [the outermost layer of tissue] in the fetus, which includes skin," Dr. Skotnicki says, and they may pose a risk of birth defects.⁴ You should also be careful about certain antibiotics, such as doxycycline—it belongs to a class of antibiotics, tetracyclines, that

have been shown to negatively affect fetal bone and teeth development.⁵ Depending on your doctor's recommendations, you may also need to limit benzoyl peroxide and salicylic acid. It's been confirmed that they're generally safe in low concentrations during pregnancy, but the research is limited, Dr. Skotnicki says.

You should also be cautious about brightening ingredients—[particularly hydroquinone](#), which hasn't been studied enough in pregnant people and has the potential to affect fetal development, as you may absorb about 35 to 45% of topical hydroquinone into your bloodstream.⁷ One other skin-care ingredient to avoid is CBD, mostly because, again, there haven't been enough studies on its effects on pregnant people, Dr. Skotnicki says.

In general, though, we don't have a ton of information about how these (and, honestly, most) ingredients affect pregnant people, [the AAD says](#). Many of these recommendations are based on an absence of conclusive evidence that they are safe rather than having evidence that they're definitely harmful.

Above all it's important to check in with your doctor or dermatologist before using something on your skin when pregnant or breastfeeding because they can assess your individual skin situation and help you figure out what makes sense for you.

More on caring for your skin while you're pregnant:

- [How to Safely Treat Your Postpartum Acne](#)
- [5 Acne Products That Are Safe to Use While Pregnant or Trying to Conceive](#)
- [17 Skin-Care and Beauty Products People Loved When They Were Pregnant](#)

[Back to top](#)

What if I have a specific medical condition that affects my skin?

If you have a skin condition (such as rosacea, psoriasis, eczema, or severe acne) or any condition that affects your skin, it's important for you to see a dermatologist and make your skin-care decisions with their input. Not only is your skin likely to be more sensitive to skin-care products, but you also don't want to do anything that might exacerbate the underlying condition.

Plus if you're trying to manage that condition, you can only go so far with over-the-counter products. Sometimes they can get the job done (like using a drugstore cleanser containing salicylic acid for mild acne), but you want to be sure that you're not overlooking another option that may be more effective, like a prescription retinoid.

So over-the-counter products aren't off-limits for you entirely, but you will want to approach them with caution. It may be wise for you to do patch tests (putting a small amount of a new product on your inner arm for a day or two) before using anything new, especially something that you saw on TikTok, Dr. Hartman says. If you're able, it would be even wiser to have a dermatologist perform a formal test in their office to see which ingredients you're likely to be sensitive to so that you're not exacerbating the skin condition with too much experimentation on your own. With the right approach, skin care can be an effective (and maybe even fun!) way to manage the symptoms of your condition.

More on caring for your skin if you have a medical condition:

- [What Can Centella Asiatica Really Do for Red, Dry, Sensitive Skin?](#)
- [How to Tell if Your 'Acne' Might Actually Be Rosacea](#)
- [Here's How Stress Actually Impacts Your Skin](#)
- [How to Tell the Difference Between Psoriasis and Eczema](#)
- [I Have Keratosis Pilaris. These 8 Products Actually Smoothed My Skin](#)

[Back to top](#)

Photo: Felicity Ingram; Wardrobe: Ronald Burton; Hair: Jerome Cultrera at L'Atelier; Makeup: Porsche Cooper; Manicure: Yukie Miyakawa at Walter Schupfer

What about “clean” beauty? How do I make sure everything in my skin-care routine is safe?

Considering how little the FDA is involved in regulating cosmetic skin-care ingredients, it's understandable that you'd want to do whatever you can to make sure you're only putting the safest ingredients possible on your skin.

But words like “clean” and “natural” on skin-care products are **more buzzwords than anything else**. These terms don't have agreed-upon definitions and aren't regulated by the FDA, so any company can define clean beauty however it wants and give itself that label. There is no formal definition or nationally recognized or accepted standards when it comes to those claims,” Dr. Kikam says. If you're concerned about certain ingredients like “fragrance,” parabens, or phthalates because they can be irritating to sensitive skin, your best bet is to avoid products that list those ingredients on the label, she advises. (**Research from the National Eczema Association**

shows that fragrance chemicals cause allergic reactions in 8 to 15% of people with contact dermatitis, and reactions to parabens and phthalates seem to be less common but still possible).⁸
⁹

It's also important to remember that just because something is natural doesn't mean it's safe. In fact, natural herbal and botanical ingredients are frequently irritants and allergens for those with sensitive skin. And our health concerns about certain chemicals in makeup and skin-care products are [often overblown](#).

Moreover, herbal and botanical ingredients (which are still chemicals, BTW) aren't necessarily analogous to the compounds tested in clinical trials. For instance, rose hip contains vitamin A but isn't the same thing as retinol or retinoic acid, so you don't necessarily know how much vitamin A you're putting on your face or what kinds of effects you can expect.

Again, we recommend opting for products that contain ingredients we know the most about. And if you're not sure if something is right for your skin, talk to a dermatologist.

More on what "clean" and "natural" skin care really mean:

- [What the Research Says About 10 Controversial Cosmetics Ingredients](#)
- [A Beginner's Guide to Vegan and Cruelty-Free Beauty and Skin Care](#)

[Back to top](#)

I'm really excited to get started. Which products do you like best?

Well, first off we'd suggest checking out the [2021 SELF Healthy Beauty Awards winners](#). These products were selected with the help of dermatologists, as well as reviews from 65 judges with different skin types, skin conditions, and skin concerns.

Definitely also take a look at these stories on finding the mainstays of your skin-care regimen: [cleanser](#), [moisturizer](#), and [sunscreen](#).

If you're interested in looking for products containing specific active ingredients or products that can help address certain skin concerns, check out these handy articles:

- [The 22 Best Eye Creams, According to Dermatologists](#)
- [The 29 Best Skin-Care Products for Aging Skin—That Dermatologists Actually Use](#)
- [13 Dermatologist-Approved Moisturizers That Your Dry Skin Will Love](#)
- [The 20 Best Derm-Approved Moisturizers for Acne-Prone Skin](#)
- [The Best Acne Spot Treatments Dermatologists Swear By](#)
- [I'm a Beauty Editor With Sensitive Skin and These Are the 11 Holy Grail Skin-Care Products I Use \(Almost\) Every Day](#)
- [The 17 Best Acne Treatments, According to Dermatologists](#)
- [7 Over-the-Counter Retinol Serums and Creams Dermatologists Highly Recommend](#)
- [8 Niacinamide Products Dermatologists Absolutely Swear By](#)
- [The Best Facial Sunscreens on Amazon, According to Customer Reviews](#)
- [16 Skin-Care Products Women With Rosacea Love](#)
- [16 Skin-Care Products Women With Eczema Love](#)

We hope that this guide has helped you demystify the world of skin care. Be sure to check all our [skin-care coverage here](#).

[Back to top](#)

Sources:

1. *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology*, Topical niacinamide-containing product reduces facial skin sallowness (yellowing)
2. *MedlinePlus*, Azelaic Acid Topical
3. *British Journal of Dermatology*, Prospective, randomized, double-blind assessment of topical bakuchiol and retinol for facial photoageing
4. *Indian Journal of Dermatology*, Moisturizers: The Slipper Road
5. *Canadian Family Physician*, Safety of skin care products during pregnancy
6. *Expert Opinion on Drug Safety*, Revisiting doxycycline in pregnancy and early childhood—time to rebuild its reputation?
7. *StatPearls*, Hydroquinone
8. *FDA*, Parabens in Cosmetics

9. *Environment International*, Phthalate exposure and allergic diseases: Review of epidemiological and experimental evidence



Sarah Jacoby was the Associate News Director at [SELF](#). She's an experienced health and science journalist who is particularly interested in the science of skin care, sexual and reproductive health, drugs and drug policy, and mental health. Sarah is a graduate of NYU's Science, Health, and Environmental Reporting Program and... [Read more](#)



Mara Santilli is a freelance writer and editor who covers women's health, beauty and wellness trends, and topics related to health equity. She's a graduate of Fordham University with a dual degree in Communication and Media Studies and Italian Studies. In addition to SELF, she's contributed to *Women's Health*, *Marie Claire*,... [Read more](#)

SELF does not provide medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Any information published on this website or by this brand is not intended as a substitute for medical advice, and you should not take any action before consulting with a healthcare professional.

Topics Skin Care skin health skin

Sign up for our SELF Healthy Beauty newsletter

Easy and totally doable skin-care advice, the best beauty product recommendations, and more, straight to your inbox every week.

Enter Your E-Mail Address

Your e-mail address

SIGN UP NOW

Will be used in accordance with our [Privacy Policy](#).