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The retino debate

It's the age-erasing ingredient dermatologists swear by. And now a new breed of products are making younger, healthier skin a reality—at home

By **Aimée Leabon**

What if you could improve skin texture, smooth wrinkles, even out discoloration and tighten pores—with just one ingredient? Here's the good news: your days of piling on anti-ageing products are over because such an ingredient does exist, and it's likely some form of it's already in your bathroom cabinet—retinol. This vitamin A derivative has long been a favourite of dermatologists but is now making a comeback thanks to groundbreaking new technology. "Vitamin A is essential to any skincare regimen—it's by far the best reparative compound we have," explains associate professor Greg Goodman from the Dermatology Institute of Victoria. So how have retinols changed and, the big question, should you be using them? Read on to find out. ▶

The rundown on retinol

POP QUIZ: What ingredient has decades of research proving it can make ageing skin look younger? You guessed it: retinol. In fact, this chemical compound is the only ingredient shown in major clinical studies to do everything from smoothing fine lines and fading dark spots to shrinking pores. “In the ’80s, research showed that skin had a visible improvement in the signs of ageing after using Retin-A—the original retinoid product,” explains *Prevention* adviser Dr Stephen Shumack. “While a number of people had great results, it was hard to use and caused dryness and increased sun sensitivity.” Pharmaceutical companies developed a number of alternatives to Retin-A by formulating milder molecules (such as retinol and retinyl palmitate), which “have similar benefits to Retin-A with far fewer side effects” Dr Shumack adds.

So, how do they work? Retinol, for example, activates receptors in skin to normalise cells that are abnormal. In other words, it encourages cell turnover and exfoliation to reduce fine lines and wrinkles, fade pigmentation and produce fresh collagen and elastin. “The skin becomes plumper, softer and smoother and irritation is less of a problem with these newer agents,” explains Dr Shumack. Be cautious if you suffer from sensitive skin or rosacea and avoid using retinol with alpha hydroxy acid (AHA) products. “Retinol is active enough—you may be diluting the beneficial effect and adding to the irritation,” Goodman reveals.

Best options for beginners

ARE YOU A RETINOL ROOKIE? Before rushing to your GP, try an over-the-counter cream. “While there’s greater evidence to support that prescription retinoids work, they’re irritating and much more difficult to use than an over-the-counter version,” says Dr Shumack. OTC varieties irritate less because the retinol is slowly converted to retinoic acid. It may simply take more time (up to 12 weeks) to notice a difference in your skin

FAST FACT

Retinol can help treat more than 100 skin concerns, including adult acne, eczema, pigmentation, dryness and fine lines

than if you’d used a prescription (four to eight weeks). Look for products formulated with at least 0.1% of retinol (the most effective form in OTC versions) and packed in aluminium tubes (air and light can degrade the formula, reducing effectiveness). If you don’t notice benefits after three months, consider trying a prescription-strength formula. Bonus: the OTC product will have helped prepare your skin for the stronger prescription retinoid, so you’ll be less likely to suffer the side effects of a more powerful version.

Advice from skin doctors

SUN DAMAGE? Sun spots? Wrinkles? Sounds like you’re ready for a prescription retinoid. Although OTC products are gentler on your skin and often less expensive, nothing compares to the changes you’ll see with a prescription formula. “The shedding of the skin’s top layer takes six to eight weeks, but if you can get to the other side, you’ll have a friend for life in the prescription Retin-A,” says Goodman. “The skin has an evening out of pigment, diminished fine lines and better reflection of light.” The most commonly prescribed retinoids for rejuvenative purposes are Retriev and Stieva-A (their emollient base makes them especially suitable for those with very dry skin), Tazorac (the strongest retinoid, it’s ideal for seriously sun-damaged skin), and Differin (easiest on sensitive skin). Your doctor will decide what formulation—either a gel or cream—and the strength that will work best for you and monitor your skin’s response to the retinoid over time. ▶

OVER-THE-COUNTER VS PRESCRIPTIONS

Prescription retinoids and retinol are like Panadeine Forte and Panadol: both are effective, but one is more potent—it’ll work faster but can cause side effects. “Retinoic acid [the active ingredient in prescription creams] is 20 to 50 times stronger than over-the-counter retinol, and you may be a bit red and scaly for the first few weeks or months of use,” explains Goodman. Prescription retinoids are recommended for those with severe sun damage and skin spots, but consult your doctor to see if you’re a candidate. “Around 90% of ageing in Australia is caused by sun damage and the average Aussie 40-year-old should be using a prescription retinoid,” says Goodman.

FAST
FACT

Retin-A was originally developed to treat acne, but clinical trials soon revealed that it also dramatically improved the signs of ageing

YOUR RETINOL REGIMEN

Maximise the anti-ageing benefits of retinol so the only 'side effect' you see is younger, healthier-looking skin

PLAN AHEAD FOR BEST RESULTS

Fact: it takes between four and six months for your skin to get used to retinol. Check your calendar for a 'safe window' with no major events (your daughter's wedding, a high school reunion, etc) on the horizon. Then, follow a few simple starter steps to unlock the best results and create younger, fresher, smoother-looking skin, fast.

START USING THEM IN SUMMER

You've heard the good news. Now the not-so-good: retinol is likely to dry out your skin to some extent, so summer—when there's more humidity in the air—is an ideal time to start using one. Alternatively, use a slightly richer moisturiser.

CLEAR OUT CLASHING PRODUCTS

Beware of potential irritants! Facial products likely to react with retinol include scrubs and exfoliators, alcohol-based toners and astringents, along with medicated cleansers and make-up.

AIM TO WAX BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Schedule one last facial-waxing appointment—dry skin is more prone to burning. Allow any irritation from retinol to subside before resuming waxing.

ONLY USE A PEA-SIZED AMOUNT

To avoid redness and irritation, avoid sensitive areas like the lips and upper eyelids. Immediately after, pat a tissue on your skin; if it sticks, you've used too much. Next time, halve the amount.

ALWAYS APPLY IN THE EVENING

Retinol is best applied just before bed. The reason? Sunlight can degrade its effectiveness, according to Goodman. To help keep dryness, flakiness and redness to a minimum, cleanse your skin about 20 minutes before you apply the retinoid cream or gel; damp skin increases risk of sensitivity. Then apply the retinol and, in another 20 minutes, your moisturiser. This will avoid sealing the medication into your skin, which makes it stronger and more likely to irritate.

BE VIGILANT ABOUT SUNSCREEN

Because retinol sloughs dead surface cells, removing skin's natural protection against UV exposure, be religious about applying a broad-spectrum sunscreen with an SPF of at least 30 (the higher the better) every morning. Even in winter. You can also use a topical antioxidant like a serum with green tea to reduce inflammation.

THE KEY? BUILD UP GRADUALLY

Most dermatologists suggest applying a retinol-based product every third day—at least for the first two weeks. Use retinol every other day for the next 14 days and gradually build up to daily use. For some people (especially those with fair complexions and light-coloured eyes), the process might take longer and others may be satisfied with the results of using retinol every other day. You'll have to keep up your routine long-term to maintain the benefits. **22**

THE PREVENTION ROAD TEST

Not sure which brand to buy? Our panel reviews the best over-the-counter options on the market.

Two years shy of 50 and my fine lines are no longer really that 'fine', so the soft, tingling sensation of this easy-to-apply cream gives me hope as it goes to work—youthful skin here I come! **StriVectin-AR Advanced Retinol Night Treatment** (\$120, 02 9663 4277) *Leanne Croker, Chief Sub-editor*



After using this cream, I'm a convert. It feels luxurious and my skin is clearly smoother and more hydrated. Plus, while I'm rather fond of my lines, they're definitely less visible. **Neutrogena Ageless Intensives Deep Wrinkle Night** (\$29.99, 1800 029 979) *Cecily-Anna Bennett, Features Editor*



This moisturising formula really works, leaving my skin looking fresher and more vibrant. There was a little redness at first but it disappeared after about a week, leaving my skin feeling soft and smooth. **Glow by Dr Brandt Overnight Resurfacing System** (\$128, 1800 007 844) *Lucette Yusef, Art Director*

