

Everything You Need To Know About A Damaged Skin Barrier: Causes, Remedies, Best Products + Expert Tips



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Repairing a damaged [skin barrier](#) will certainly improve the aesthetic appearance of your skin—but this barrier holds importance for your overall

health, too. It's easy to get caught up in the superficial side of skin care, but you can't forget that your skin is an organ—the largest organ on your body.

Just as any other organ dysfunction would have implications for your overall health, the skin isn't any different. And while we've commercialized products, devices, and treatments—skin care starts with barrier care.

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We asked dermatologists for the 101 on barrier repair from signs of damage to best repair remedies and more. Let's dive in.

What is the skin barrier?

First things first—let us explain what exactly the barrier *is*. "The skin barrier starts with the top layer of the skin called 'epidermis,'" board-certified dermatologist [Kseniya Kobets, M.D., MHS, FAAD](#), tells mbg._

"This layer is made up of exfoliating skin cells that turn over every 28 days. This skin layer has channels that allow water to be absorbed and evaporated and has hydrating ingredients like [ceramides](#), free fatty acid, and linoleic acid, to maintain a healthy skin barrier that protects us from external pollution, sun damage, and pathogens like bacteria, yeast, and viruses," she adds.

Now you know the *very* basic function of the skin barrier. Up next, a quick breakdown of each part of the stratum corneum in a bit more detail.

What makes up the skin barrier:

"The skin barrier is comprised of a chemical, physical, and immunological

barrier. The epidermis is composed of five layers," board-certified dermatologist and founder of [Bergen Dermatology Naana Boakye, M.D., MPH](#), tells mbg. Here, a bit more about each layer:

- 1** **Proteins:** Think of the proteins, or keratinocytes, on your skin as the "brick," of the brick and mortar.
- 2** **Lipids:** The lipids, or fats, can also be seen as the moisture barrier in the skin and the *mortar* completing your skin's initial defense layer. This part is also known as the [moisture barrier](#), and it's made up of fats like ceramides, fatty acids, squalene, etc.
- 3** **Skin microbiome:** The [skin microbiome](#), sometimes called the skin flora, is the term for [the trillions of bugs](#)^{1✓} that live on our skin.
- 4** **Skin's immune system:** Believe it or not, your skin has its own immune system. In fact, your skin can even [release antimicrobial peptides](#)^{2✓} to help rebalance your microbiome (think of it like teamwork).
- 5** **Acid mantle:** Finally, there's a layer of acid film that sits on your skin called the [acid mantle](#). This layer protects the skin from bacteria, helps the microbiome flourish, and locks in moisture.

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What the skin barrier does & why it matters.

As you can tell, the skin barrier isn't just how your skin looks but rather how it lives, too. In turn, a healthy skin barrier means a healthier you, and vice versa.

"It protects us from mechanical injury, low humidity, cold, heat, sun, wind, chemical exposure, bacteria, viruses, fungi, and other pathogens," board-certified dermatologist [Hadley King, M.D.](#), [said about the barrier](#) and added that "a healthy barrier is critical to normal skin function."

And this isn't just skin deep—research has demonstrated a link between [skin dysfunction and various health conditions](#) caused by chronic inflammation. In one study, researchers connected the use of barrier repair moisturizers with

reduced pro-inflammatory cytokines in the blood, highlighting the importance of the skin's protective role in our overall health: Namely, that poor barrier function is linked to inflammation that can trigger other health concerns.

Not only that, but it's literally what we think of when we think of us, our skin. When you look in the mirror, you're looking at your skin barrier. It's quite literally the most recognizable part of you.

Summary:

Your skin barrier helps keep good things in and bad things out. When your barrier is compromised, it can lead to chronic inflammation in the entire body, which, as you know, can trigger a long list of medical conditions both related to and separated from the skin.

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Signs of a damaged barrier.

It's safe to say that you probably know what your skin looks like when your barrier is functioning normally. If you've never been intentional about topical skin care, then you may not even know what it *could* look like at its best. But either way—realizing your skin barrier is out of wack isn't always easy, either. To follow, a few telltale signs to help you out:

- [Inflammation](#)
- Increased dryness
- Increased oiliness and [breakouts](#) (if that's out of the norm)
- Itch
- Redness
- Increased skin infections
- Sensitivity to even gentle products

How can you tell the difference between a rash or allergic reaction and a damaged barrier?

"Rashes and contact dermatitis can occur secondary to an abnormal or impaired skin barrier; however, when seen alone, rashes tend to be much more extreme, very itchy or tender, very red, sometimes even very bumpy," board-certified dermatologist [Roberta Del Campo, M.D.](#), medical adviser for BABOR and founder of Del Campo Dermatology & Laser Institute, tells mbg.

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6 things that could be damaging your barrier.

If the signs above apply to you, then your barrier might be damaged. To find out what may have triggered it, scan through the following common causes—from lifestyle factors to skin care products and more. It's not always easy to play detective at home, but this list should give you a good start:

1. Harsh skin care routines.

While there are plenty of factors that contribute to a damaged skin barrier, board-certified dermatologist and assistant clinical professor of dermatology at Mt. Sinai School of Medicine [Jeannette Graf, M.D.](#), says skin care products might be the most common culprit.

"The most common is over-stripping the skin of its natural oils," Graf says. "This can be done by washing your face too much and over-exfoliating the skin," she adds. While retinol, [AHAs, and BHAs](#) have wonderful benefits, they should be used in moderation (as with [skin cycling](#)).

Plus, Graf says these actives should be used in conjunction with a barrier-supporting routine. Translation: Use *one* active product, not five. If you're looking to exfoliate, use *one* exfoliating serum or physical wash, not both—you

get the idea.

How often you should exfoliate will depend on your skin type, goals, and any current skin conditions you're dealing with. [Here's more on proper exfoliating cadence](#) if you want to dive deeper.

Summary

Using harsh skin care products and over-exfoliating the skin can lead to a damaged skin barrier. Work on cycling through your skin care ([here's how](#)), and use actives within a robust barrier-repair routine—also, never mix your retinol and exfoliating serum.

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2. Diet.

Know this: Your gut and skin are directly connected. To put this into perspective, "About 7 to 11% of people with inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), for instance, [have psoriasis](#)^{3✓}," board-certified internal medicine doctor [Vincent Pedre once told mbg](#).

"Gut inflammation eventually can become *systemic* inflammation. And that, along with [oxidative stress, blood sugar imbalances, and other problems](#)^{4✓}, can all show up on your skin—especially if you are genetically predisposed to these conditions," he adds.

But what foods are the most triggering? "The simple sugars, when digested, cause rapid insulin spikes that result in the downstream effect of inflammation, which, in turn, leads to skin barrier breakdown," board-certified dermatologist [Rachel Westbay, M.D., FAAD](#), of Marmur Medical tells mbg.

Even acne, the most common skin condition, can be *improved* when focusing on gut health. "One study found a [probiotic supplement improved acne in 80%](#)

[of the 300 participants](#)^{3✓}. Among their benefits, probiotics can help modulate immunity and inflammation, reducing acne in the process," Pedre said.

What's more, one study noted by the American Academy of Dermatology reported that women who drank two or more glasses of skim milk a day were [44% more likely to have breakouts](#)^{5✓}.

Another study noted on the AAD demonstrated that a low-glycemic index diet [may result in fewer pimples](#). Not sure which foods are considered high on the glycemic index? [Check out this story](#).

"Lacking nutrients like [omega-3 fatty acids](#) can be an issue, as well," Westbay says. "Derivatives of omega-3 fatty acids are thought to influence the skin barrier by acting as transcription factors that increase the synthesis of filaggrin, an integral protein that brings together other structural proteins in the outermost skin cells to actually form the skin barrier," she adds.

Summary

The gut and skin are connected, which is why what you eat directly affects your skin. Skim milk and high-glycemic foods have been known to trigger inflammatory skin responses like acne, while probiotics and omega-3 fatty acids have demonstrated the opposite.

3. Stress.

When your body's cortisol levels are spiked, your skin shifts. A few bouts of stress can cause you to produce [more sebum that could lead to increased breakouts](#)^{6✓} (yes, [stress acne](#) is a real thing).

What's more, *chronic* stress can lead to an [imbalanced microbiome](#) in which the bacteria responsible for acne can flourish.

And to top it all off, your skin may have a harder time dealing with existing acne and scarring when you're really stressed. One study on stress and wound

healing found that [stress can actually slow down healing](#)^{7✓}, which can make healing from breakouts even more difficult.

Summary

When you're stressed, your skin produces more sebum and the microbiome is compromised, which can lead to more breakouts. In addition, your wound healing may be compromised during times of stress. Check out this story for [more information on stress acne, solutions, and expert tips](#).

4. Sun damage.

"[UV exposure](#) damages the skin barrier by causing free radicals, which subsequently leads to burns and skin cancer," Boakye notes. Plus, when your skin gets to the point of peeling off (as happens with severe sunburns), you're literally removing a layer of your skin.

You can repair the skin from things like sunburns, but you can never fully [repair sun damage](#). This is why it's so essential to prioritize UV protection via face and body [sunscreen](#). Even if it's cloudy, you should still be wearing sunscreen daily both to prevent UV damage and encourage healthy skin aging.

Summary

UV exposure damages the skin barrier and may lead to burns and skin cancer. Be sure to wear SPF every day on any area that sees the sun.

5. Skin diseases.

Regardless of lifestyle factors, those with certain skin conditions may be more prone to barrier damage than others. "The two most common conditions dermatologists think of when we consider someone an inherent risk of skin barrier dysfunction are eczema and rosacea," Westbay notes.

In part, this is because those with eczema and rosacea already have dry skin to begin with due to a natural lack of [ceramides](#) in the skin. This means they're just a bit closer to a compromised barrier without being exposed to any other triggers.

This is why it is so important for those with eczema and rosacea to visit a dermatologist for assistance. If you have pre-sensitive skin and use harsh topical products without knowing, get sunburned, etc., the reaction will be much more severe and difficult to repair.

Summary

Those with eczema and rosacea are more prone to skin barrier damage. This is why you should visit a dermatologist if you believe you have either of these skin conditions for proper treatment and product advice.

6. Having sensitive skin naturally.

Those with sensitive skin already have a compromised skin barrier as well. Remember how the barrier functions as a protective shield? Well, that applies to "normal" skin, or skin that isn't as sensitive.

When that shield is weakened, it isn't as able to perform this role, allowing irritants to penetrate the skin and cause major and chronic disruptions in the form of rashes, inflammation, texture changes, burning, and so on.

However, if your skin is not *typically* sensitive but has been as of late, then you might have a compromised skin barrier at the moment. Don't worry—you can repair it. More on that next.

Summary

Those with sensitive skin already have a compromised skin barrier, meaning they may be more vulnerable to irritants, inflammation, texture changes, burning,

etc.

How to heal your skin barrier:

1. Address any habits that may be damaging the skin.

Check the list above and write down (or make a mental note) of what applies to you right now. Are you [over-exfoliating](#)? Going outside without SPF? Are you more stressed than usual?

Determine what factors are directly contributing to your damaged barrier right now and eliminate them, or manage them to the best of your ability.

2. Use barrier-supporting skin care + avoid irritants.

postbiotic body lotion

Ultra-hydrating formula that nourishes your skin barrier, available in unscented and neroli

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When your barrier is damaged, you should tread *very* carefully in terms of topical products. You'll want to stay away from fragrance for the time being, as a damaged barrier is more susceptible to developing allergies or sensitivities.

We have a lengthy list of your best-bet ingredients for topical barrier repair in a bit, but here's a quick list of what to *avoid*, as that's just as important:

- Fragrance (again, this is important)
- Chemical exfoliants like AHAs, BHAs, and PHAs
- Retinol in any form
- Physical scrubs
- Astringent toner
- Facials
- Microneedling
- Dermaplaning
- Dermarolling
- UV exposure (even protected)
- Chlorine or salt water

Your go-to routine might seem simplified, but that's the point. The daily ritual for a compromised barrier will include a gentle [cleanser](#), [hydrating serums](#), ceramide creams, and non-fragranced [occlusive oils](#) to lock in hydration.

3. Tend to the microbiome.

In order to feed your skin's microbiome, consider adding a topical product with [pre- or postbiotics](#) to your routine. These can be found in serums, essences, face mists, or moisturizers.

4. Support the barrier from the inside.

As you now know, your skin is sensitive to what's happening inside your body—but it will respond to positive triggers, too. Do your best to consume *loads* of water to support your hydration levels and prevent [dehydrated skin](#) and consume skin-loving ingredients.

Skin supplements are one easy way to essentially ingest skin care—think ceramides, hyaluronic acid, antioxidants, etc. If you're on the hunt, [this guide will help you choose the best one for your skin](#) and provide expert-approved picks.

A+ ingredients for a damaged skin barrier.

Now that you know what to avoid when tending to a damaged skin barrier, keep the following ingredients on your go-to list:

- Ceramides
- Amino acids
- Fatty acids
- [Squalane](#)
- Panthenol (vitamin B5)
- Hyaluronic acid
- Aloe vera
- Prebiotics
- Postbiotics
- [Collodial oatmeal](#)
- Peptides
- Shea + mango butter

Best barrier-repair serums



Cocokind

Ceramide Barrier Serum

\$22

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Grown Alchemist

Instant Smoothing Serum

\$62

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Beekman 1802

Milk Drops Ceramide Serum

\$45

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How long does it take to heal?

Luckily, the skin is an incredibly resilient organ. This means it can certainly be healed. In fact, it doesn't take too long.

Here's a quick estimate as board-certified dermatologist [Whitney Bowe, M.D., FAAD, once explained](#): For a severely damaged barrier, as is with a sunburn, it will take a minimum of a few days to repair the skin barrier. However, for mild damage, as occurs with over-exfoliation or increased dryness, you might even be able to repair the barrier in just a few hours—if you take the right steps like those above.

Best moisturizers for damaged skin barrier



Dr. Whitney Bowe Beauty

BoweGlow

\$95

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Skinfix

Barrier+ Skin Barrier Niacinamide Restoring Gel Cream

\$48

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First Aid Beauty

Ultra Repair Cream

\$38

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FAQ

How long does it take a damaged skin barrier to heal?



Is my skin barrier permanently damaged? ✓

What should I avoid with a damaged skin barrier? ✓

The takeaway.

Phew—that was a lot. Your skin barrier is incredibly important for your health, but it's also easily damaged. To repair a damaged skin barrier, avoid irritating ingredients, procedures, and devices. Opt for hydrating, soothing topical products and prioritize hydration from within as well. To learn more about the skin barrier (and some exciting new developments), [check out this story](#).

postbiotic body lotion

Ultra-hydrating formula that nourishes your skin barrier, available in unscented and neroli

★★★★★ (73)



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