

BEAUTY

# 6 Essential Things to Know Before Using Retinol and Retinoids

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Photograph



Ah, retinol. When it comes to defense against fine lines and maintaining a healthy glow, there's no ingredient in skincare more lauded. The irony? Even though the revolutionary youth-enhancing active is a mainstay of drugstores, department store counters, and dermatologist offices alike, it still manages to mystify. And thus, it's often underutilized or misused.

## What is retinol?

To bring it back to the basics, retinol—alongside other retinoids, such as retinoic acid and retinyl palmitate—is essentially a derivative of vitamin A, which is one of the body's key nutrients for boosting cell turnover. “It's added to topical skincare products to promote skin renewal, brighten skin tone, reduce acne, and boost the collagen production,” explains New York City dermatologist Whitney Bowe, MD. “It also functions like an antioxidant to help address free radical damage, which leads to visible signs of aging.” The way dermatologist Francesca Fusco, MD, sees it, it's the ingredient that does it all in dermatology, both cosmetically and medically. “I consider it a gold standard in skincare and often explain it to my patients as something that sweeps away dead skin cells, clogged pores, and dull skin,” she explains.

Here, experts break down how to carefully incorporate the powerhouse ingredient into your regimen to achieve a supernaturally fresh-faced complexion, now and for decades to come.

## Begin in Your Mid-20s or Early 30s

Thirty has long been the banner year for introducing retinol into one's routine, but many women are starting before then, motivated by early signs of aging, such as sun spots or crows feet, or simply eager to get a head start and utilize the latest technologies—under the careful watch of their dermatologist. “Your mid-twenties are a great time to start

using retinol,” says Ellen Marmur, M.D. “Many patients who have used it for years swear by it.”



PCA Skin Retinol Treatment for Sensitive Skin

\$115 AT NORDSTROM



## U Beauty Resurfacing Compound

\$148 AT NET-A-PORTER



## Shani Darden Skin Care Retinol Reform

\$88 AT SEPHORA



## Kate Somerville +Retinol Vitamin C Moisturizer

\$110 AT ULTA

## Integrate Retinol Slowly and Gently

“Balance is critical,” cautions Bowe. “Retinol can be very irritating if used too frequently or if the formulation is too strong for your skin.” She recommends starting off with a pea-sized amount of a low percentage over-the-counter formula (.01% to 0.03%), and using it “two times per week, slowly increasing the usage to give the skin a chance to acclimate.” Moreover, you should skip your retinol product on the day before you exfoliate (Bowe recommends exfoliating two to three times per week). “Exfoliating is abrasive and irritating, and you do not want to compound the skin irritation by heightening your skin’s sensitivity,” she says, adding that if you’re getting certain in-office treatments like lasers, microneedling, microdermabrasion, you will want to take a break from your retinol. In the spirit of not overdoing it, there’s a spate of new time-release formulas fit for skin types prone to redness or breakouts. “They’re a good option for people who have sensitive skin,” explains Fusco. “It releases the active ingredient over time and may offer less irritation.” In terms of prescription retinol versus something over the counter, the former is much more potent with a higher percentage of retinol, and one may graduate to it over time, says Bowe.



La Roche-Posay Redermic R Retinol Cream

\$51 AT ULTA



SkinMedica Age Defense Retinol Complex .25

\$64 AT DERMSTORE



Marie Veronique Gentle Retinol Night Serum

\$115 AT CREDO BEAUTY



### Drunk Elephant A-Passioni Retinol Cream

\$74 AT SEPHORA

## Watch Out for Harsh Side Effects

While certain side effects, such as mild irritation, dryness, and sun sensitivity, are normal as your skin adjusts to the active ingredient, intense flaking, redness, and burning are not—and those with especially sensitive skin, or who struggle with conditions like rosacea or eczema, should be wary of retinol or shy away from it altogether. “If you cannot tolerate retinol, don’t worry,” says Marmur. “It’s not the only anti-ager! There are plenty of amazing anti-aging ingredients, such as wild indigo, that work beautifully without any irritation or sun sensitivity.”



### Lancer Advanced Retinol Treatment

\$95 AT NET-A-PORTER



Algenist Elevate Advanced Retinol Serum

\$98 AT NET-A-PORTER



Versed Press Restart Gentle Retinol Serum

\$22 AT VERSED



CeraVe Skin Renewing Retinol Serum

\$24 AT TARGET

\$25 AT AMAZON

\$27 AT ULTA

Use Retinol Only at Night and Wear SPF Every Day

“Although retinoids are not phototoxic, meaning they won’t react with sunlight to cause a burn on the skin the way lime juice can, many of them do break down when exposed to UV rays,” explains Bowe. “So applying your retinoid in the morning might render it less effective, and a high-quality retinoid can be quite pricey. That’s why I recommend using your retinol, or your retinal (my personal favorite retinoid, which is 10x more bioavailable than retinol) at night.” For proper sun safety, Bowe recommends being diligent about applying a daily broad-spectrum SPF 30 or higher during the day. Moreover, with retinol use, one should always be conscious of the weather forecast and trips to hot locales. “It should not be used during seasons or vacations when individuals will be spending extended time in direct sunlight,” warns Fusco.



Sunday Riley Luna Sleeping Night Oil

\$105 AT DERMSTORE



### La Prairie Cellular Power Charge Night Treatment

\$565 AT LA PRARIE



### Murad Retinol Youth Renewal Night

\$86 AT SEPHORA



### Eve Lom Time Retreat Intensive Night Cream

\$140 AT SAKS FIFTH AVENUE

## Don't Stop at Your Face

When applying a retinol-infused elixir, don't neglect your neck or décolletage, which are areas notorious for showing the signs of aging, yet often overlooked. "If those zones seem too sensitive for your current formula, add a squirt of ceramide-enriched moisturizer before smoothing it on, or pick up a separate retinoid made specifically for the area in question," says Bowe. "They typically contain a lower dose of vitamin A, zero fragrance, and loads of soothers."



### SkinCeuticals Tripeptide-R Neck Repair

\$126 AT SKINCEUTICALS



### Dr. Dennis Gross Skincare Ferulic + Retinol Wrinkle Recovery Overnight Serum

\$85 AT NET-A-PORTER



### L'Oréal Revitalift Derm Intensives Night Serum with 0.3% Pure Retinol

\$30 AT AMAZON



### Mara Evening Primrose + Green Tea Algae Retinol Oil

\$120 AT CREDO BEAUTY