

How to Know if Your Skin Is Ready for a Higher Concentration of Retinol, Plus 13 to Try

SEPTEMBER 19, 2023

ARIEL
WODA

BY: [ARIEL WODARCYK](#) |
[SKINCARE.COM BY L'ORÉAL](#)



SHARE THIS PAGE

Facebook | Pinterest | Twitter |

[Retinoids](#) (or derivatives of vitamin A) are well-studied and effective anti-aging ingredients, but unfortunately, they're not the most user-friendly. There are so many



might suffer from dryness, flaking and extra sensitivity.

To find out what type of retinol strength is best for your skin, we spoke to [Dr. Teresa Song](#), a board-certified dermatologist at [Marmur Medical](#) and [Jennifer Weiss](#), a PA-C specializing in dermatology at Marmur Medical. Keep reading for Dr. Song and Weiss's tips on incorporating retinol into your routine without irritation, plus the best topical retinol serums and products to consider for your nightly regimen.

What Is Retinol?

"[Retinol is a form of vitamin A](#) that is commonly found in skincare products for its anti-aging and exfoliating effects," says Dr. Song. "It increases the turnover of skin cells to decongest pores and improve pigmentation in the skin." Because of this, retinol is commonly used in the treatment of acne and visible signs of aging like fine lines, wrinkles and uneven skin tone.

What Retinol Strengths Are Available?

"There are four interconvertible forms of retinoids, including retinyl esters, retinol, retinaldehyde (retinal), and retinoic acid, in their respective order of potency," says Dr. Song. In science-driven speak, retinol comes in all shapes and sizes, AKA concentrations, and they are not all made equally.

"Patients who have dry and sensitive skin likely need a milder over the counter retinol to start and slowly build tolerance over time," says Dr. Song. "Patients with more oily and acne prone skin likely need stronger prescription retinoids. They can generally start with the more potent retinoic acid and can [often] tolerate serums and gel formulations."

The concentration of retinol you decide to use can make or break the way your skin reacts to it. If you're using a concentration that's too strong for your skin type, that can be the difference between a blemish-prone, irritated complexion, and a smooth, glowy and bright complexion. When it comes to what retinol strength is best for you, always consult with your dermatologist.

Low Strength

"Retinyl esters, retinol and retinaldehyde are OTC products and are precursors to retinoic acid," Dr. Song shares. "The OTC versions are less potent and cause less irritation, and those without specific labels usually indicate less than 0.25% of retinol."

Furthermore, Dr. Song shares that topical formulations with retinyl esters are the least potent and therefore, the least likely to cause irritation. “Patients who can not tolerate any form of retinoids can seek alternatives like bakuchiol and resveratrol for potential anti-inflammatory and antioxidant effects,” she adds.

Medium Strength

If you have used retinol in the past without irritation, the next step in your skincare journey may be to try adapalene. “Adapalene is most similar to a prescription strength retinoid and is available OTC,” says Dr. Song. “It does not need to be converted to retinoic acid and is light stable.”

High Strength

“Retinoic acid is the active and most potent form found in prescription [retinol] products,” says Dr. Song. “Prescription retinoids have varying concentrations (0.025%, 0.04%, 0.05%, 0.08%, 0.1%), formulations (gels, lotions, creams), and classes for different skin tolerability.”

According to Weiss, tazarotene is the strongest topical retinoid on the market, and the highest concentration it comes in is 0.1%. Because of this, it is a prescription-only retinoid.

How to Choose the Right Retinol Strength for Your Skin

1. Start Slow

“One should start [retinol] one to two times per week, then every other night the following week, and increase to nightly as tolerated,” says Dr. Song. “Once your skin tolerates this every night for about one year, you can think about increasing the percentage,” Weiss adds. “Your skin is tolerating the retinoid when nightly application does not lead to any flaking, redness, or irritation.” Always consult with your dermatologist before starting on a higher concentration on retinol.

2. Consider the Formula

“Cream formulations are more hydrating and gentle compared to lotions, serums, and gel formulations,” says Dr. Song. If you have dry or sensitive skin, stick to low concentration retinol products with cream formulas. If you have oily skin, you may need something a little stronger (i.e. prescription-strength) in a gel or serum format, per Dr. Song.

3. Build Up Usage Gradually

Misuse and overuse of retinol can lead to serious adverse implications. “Patients may experience effects such as itching, tightness and peeling of superficial skin surfaces, along with dry skin and photosensitivity,” says Dr. Song. If your skin is having a tough time adapting to the retinol, Dr. Song recommends trying the sandwich method — simply apply moisturizer before applying retinoid, and apply moisturizer again to create a barrier of hydration between your skin and the retinoid.

Best Retinols

[SkinCeuticals Retinol 1.0](#)

This high-concentration pure retinol cream is not for first-time users — according to the product’s description, it works best for sun-damaged skin that’s already tolerated a lower strength of the cream, such as the [SkinCeuticals Retinol 0.5](#). Use it at nighttime to experience increased cell turnover and improve the appearance of fine lines, wrinkles, discoloration and blemishes.





L'Oréal Paris Revitalift Night Serum, 0.3% Pure Retinol

This pure retinol nighttime serum is formulated to tackle fine lines and even deep-set wrinkles. The fragrance-free formula makes this a great medium-strength retinol, especially for those with oily skin.



SkinBetter Science AlphaRet Overnight Cream

According to Dr. Song, beginners should start with this overnight retinol cream. The product contains gentle retinyl esters with glycolic acid in a hydrating base that is often well tolerated and effective.



La Roche-Posay Retinol B3 Pure Retinol Serum

If you're a seasoned retinol user, Dr. Song recommends this French pharmacy fave. "It contains soy and niacinamide for skin sensitivity, as well as citric acid for its antioxidant effects."



CeraVe Resurfacing Retinol Serum

If you associate retinol with being harsh and irritating, think again. This drugstore formula contains encapsulated retinol to resurface skin texture and minimize the appearance of pores. In addition, it also includes ceramides and niacinamide to strengthen the skin's barrier and boost hydration.



Kiehl's Fast-Release Wrinkle-Reducing 0.3% Retinol Night Serum

Some retinol formulas contain encapsulated or slow-release retinol, which are gentle and best suited to retinol beginners. If your skin has built up its tolerance to these retinols, you can move up to a fast-release formula like this one. It features a pure retinol powder that you mix into the included serum for increased freshness. The formula was shown to visibly reduce fine lines in just five days.



La Roche Posay Effaclar Adapalene Gel 0.1% Topical Retinoid For Acne

This adapalene gel offers prescription strength topical retinoid without a prescription. Formulated with 0.1% adapalene, it helps clear and prevent blackheads, whiteheads, acne blemishes and clogged pores.

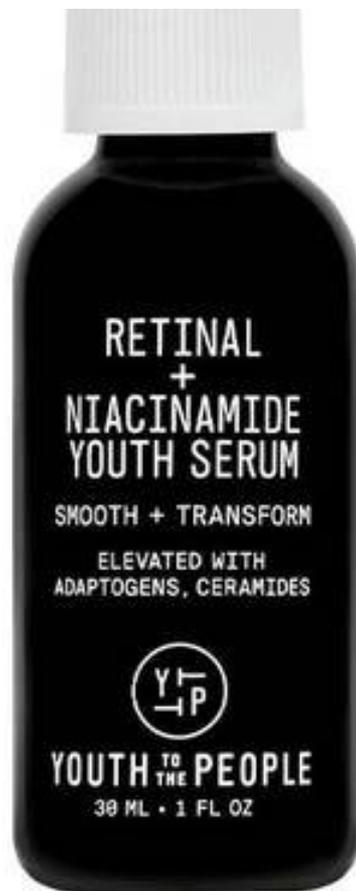




Youth To The People Retinal + Niacinamide Youth Serum

Formulated with retinal (AKA retinaldehyde, the most potent retinoid next to an Rx) you can count on this serum to brighten the appearance of your skin and reduce the look of fine lines and wrinkles. Because it contains soothing niacinamide and ceramides, you may not experience the dryness and irritation typically associated with higher-strength retinols.





MMSkincare Bright and Tight Retinol Eye Cream

According to Dr. Song, seasoned retinol users should also incorporate [retinol eye creams](#) into their routine. She likes this one because it contains retinol for skin turnover, caffeine to depuff, and peptides to nourish the skin.

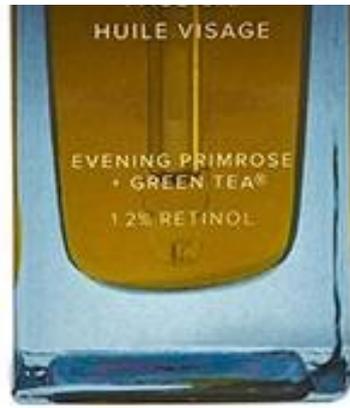




Mara Evening Primrose + Green Tea Algae Retinol Face Oil

Best suited for those with sensitive skin, this vitamin A-rich face oil works to visibly reduce fine lines and brighten the skin with continued use. If you have dry skin, the oil will also help lock in moisture.





Summer Fridays Midnight Ritual Retinol Renewal Serum

This gentle night serum suits sensitive skin and helps reduce the appearance of fine lines and wrinkles. The creamy formula also contains niacinamide and hyaluronic acid to soothe the skin and counteract the drying effects of retinol.

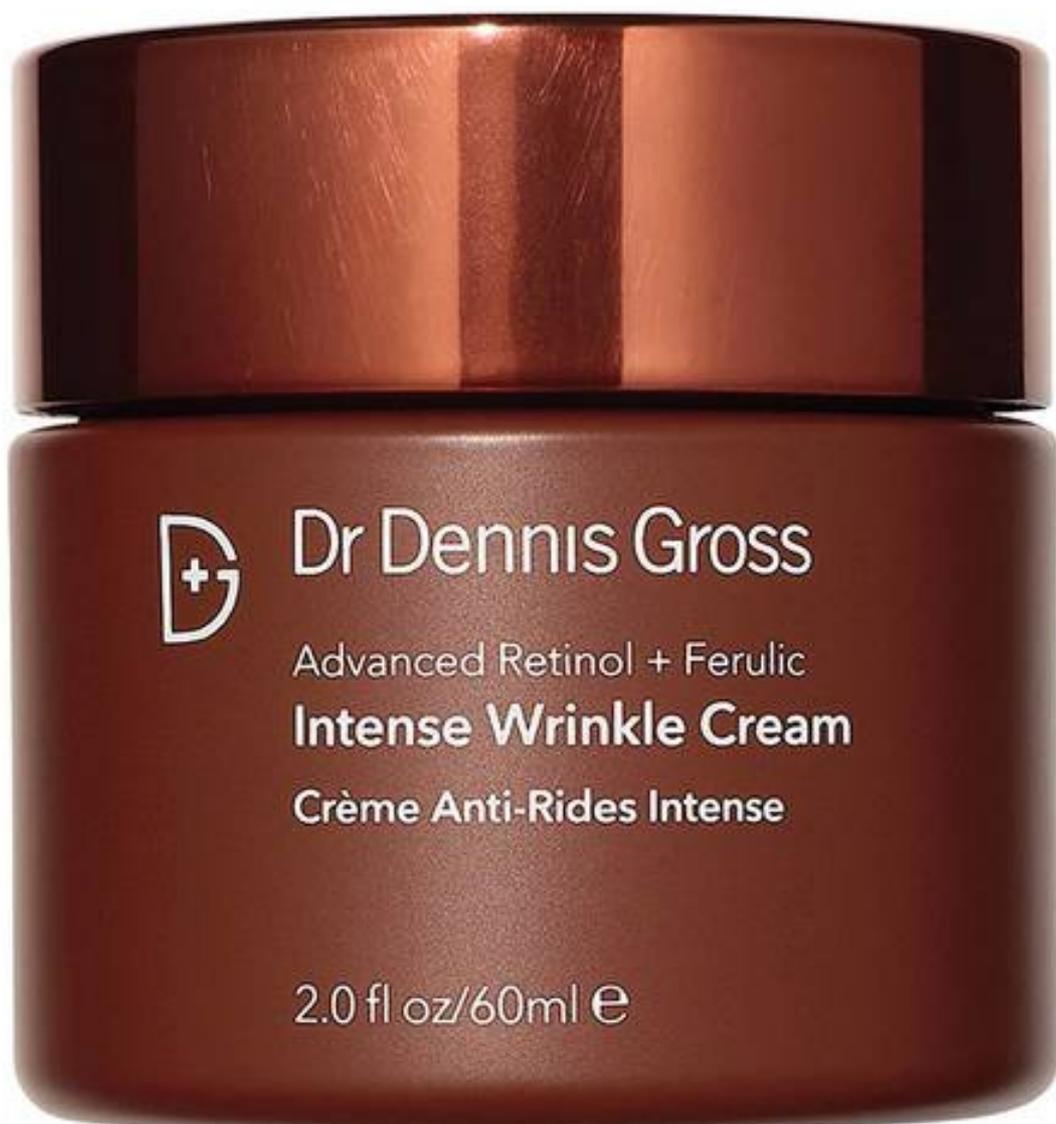


Restore | Restaure

30 ml | 1 fl oz liq US

Dr. Dennis Gross Skincare Advanced Retinol + Ferulic Intense Wrinkle Cream

This rich retinol cream creates a silky, hydrating slip on the skin to visibly lift, firm and reduce wrinkles. Smooth it on at night after applying your favorite hydrating serum.



Covey Skin Sleep Tight Bakuchiol Serum

If you can't tolerate retinol, Dr. Song recommends trying bakuchiol for similar effects sans irritation. Formulated with gentle bakuchiol, this night serum deeply moisturizes while addressing wrinkles, texture and dullness without causing dry skin or flaking. The fragrance-free formula even contains niacinamide and hyaluronic acid to promote clearer, brighter and hydrated skin.



READ MORE

Loading

[Back to top](#)

[How to Combine Vitamin C, Retinol +
Hyaluronic Acid](#)

[Here's What's Causing Your Dry Skin](#)

[An Easy Skincare Routine for Oily Skin](#)

Let's stay in touch!

By clicking Submit, I confirm I am a US resident, and (1) agree to Skincare.com's [Terms of Use](#) and to receive communications from Skincare.com and [other L'Oréal brands](#) and programs, including promotional emails; and (2) have read and acknowledged Skincare.com's [Privacy Policy](#) and [Notice of Financial Incentives](#).

[ABOUT US](#)

[HOME](#)

[MEET THE EDITORS](#)

[PRIVACY POLICY](#)

[TERMS OF USE](#)

[YOUR PRIVACY](#)

[CHOICES](#)

IC
O
N

[ACCESSIBILITY
STATEMENT](#)

[CONTACT US](#)

[HAIR.COM](#)

[USER CONTENT
PERMISSION TERMS](#)

[COOKIE SETTINGS](#)

[NOTICE AT
COLLECTION](#)

L'Oréal



Let's stay in touch!

By clicking Submit, I confirm I am a US resident, and (1) agree to Skincare.com's [Terms of Use](#) and to receive communications from Skincare.com and [other L'Oréal brands](#) and programs, including promotional emails; and (2) have read and acknowledged Skincare.com's [Privacy Policy](#) and [Notice of Financial Incentives](#).

L'Oréal

© L'Oréal USA. This site is for U.S. consumers. Cookies, related technologies and device identification are used for Personalized Advertising.

Learn More at [AdChoice](#) and our [Privacy Policy](#)

© L'Oréal USA. This site is for U.S. consumers. Cookies, related technologies and device identification are used for Personalized Advertising.

Learn More at [AdChoice](#) and our [Privacy Policy](#)