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# Hyaluronic Acid and Retinol: Everything You Need to Know About Using Them Together in Your Skincare Routine

They're basically the perfect ingredient duo.



BY **GINA WAY** PUBLISHED: NOV 9, 2023



Spotlight/Launchmetrics

S ometimes opposites don't just attract, they work better together. Take retinol and hyaluronic acid—two skincare ingredients that are completely different, but when mixed or layered correctly, can complement each other beautifully (especially if you have sensitive skin). Retinol is a gold standard anti-aging ingredient and hyaluronic acid (HA) is a stellar hydrating ingredient. Initially, they

seem to be an unlikely pairing, but it turns out that hyaluronic acid and retinol are basically the JLo and Ben Affleck of skincare: a perfect couple.

I've experienced the benefits of mixing retinol and hyaluronic acid first hand. My skin is extra sensitive, so if I apply a retinol product two nights in a row, my face is going to be red, itchy, and irritated by day three. But when I pair it with hyaluronic acid? My skin looks smooth, plump, and glowy—no matter how many nights in a row I use my retinol.

Don't believe me? Keep reading for a full breakdown of how retinol and hyaluronic acid work and the best way to use them together in your skincare routine, according to two expert dermatologists. And don't miss the best over-the-counter retinols and hyaluronic acid products to incorporate into your routine too.

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## What is hyaluronic acid?

“Hyaluronic acid is a humectant, which means that it attracts water molecules to the skin creating a hydrating and plumping effect,” explains board-certified dermatologist Ellen Marmur, MD. Because hyaluronic acid is naturally found in the skin, a topical product containing the water-binding ingredient is the key to instantly restoring hydration and plumping dry skin and fine lines on the surface without irritation. (Don’t let the word “acid” fool you, this isn't exfoliating or resurfacing like AHAs or BHAs.) Applying a hyaluronic acid serum or a hyaluronic acid face moisturizer is a drink of much-needed water for parched skin. Think of dampening a dry sponge to bring it back to fresh newness. That’s your skin on hyaluronic acid.

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# What is retinol?

Retinol is a derivative of vitamin A that helps to stimulate collagen and elastin production with continued use. Collagen and elastin are the proteins responsible for skin firmness, smoothness, and elasticity, which is why retinol is considered an anti-aging superhero by derms and skincare experts.

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“Retinol also helps to regulate healthy cell turnover, the skin’s natural renewing process, which makes it effective for also treating hyperpigmentation and acne,” says board-certified dermatologist Kavita Mariwalla, MD. The downside to retinol? It can be very drying and irritating, especially during the first few weeks of initial use. This is where hyaluronic acid comes in.

## 4 retinol serums and creams to try:



### **iS CLINICAL Retinol+ Emulsion 0.3**

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# Can retinol and hyaluronic acid be used together?

Yes, retinol and hyaluronic acid can absolutely be used together, says Dr. Marmur, adding that "these ingredients can actually help each other work better." She explains that healthy, hydrated skin is less likely than dry skin to become irritated when using a retinol. And when you experience little-to-no irritation from your retinol, you are more likely to be compliant about using it regularly, which is what ultimately makes it effective. When it comes to retinol's ability to soften fine lines and wrinkles, improve skin tone, smooth uneven texture, and reduce hyperpigmentation and breakouts, consistency is key, says Dr. Marmur.

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## Do I use retinol before or after hyaluronic acid?

Whether you use retinol before or after hyaluronic acid depends on your skin type. If you have oily or acne-prone skin, Dr. Marmur suggests applying retinol directly onto clean skin first. “I always apply the most active ingredient—in this case, retinol—first so that it has the best chance of penetrating into the skin. Then you can layer a face serum, lotion, or cream with hyaluronic acid on top.” And JSYK, many over-the-counter retinol serums and creams are formulated with hyaluronic acid to mitigate irritation, so it’s likely that yours already contains some HA in the mix.

Now, if you're like me and have super sensitive skin, you may want to try the TikTok #retinolsandwich application method instead. First, I apply a water-based hyaluronic acid serum onto clean skin. Then, once the serum has fully absorbed and my skin is no longer damp, I massage a pea-size amount of retinol all over my face and neck. Then I slather on a moisturizing lotion with hyaluronic acid and other emollients like ceramides to avert any dryness. This is *not* the slugging trend, just another light application of moisture.

Dr. Mariwalla gives a thumbs up to this retinol sandwich layering technique. “A hydrating, water-based serum will not dilute the retinol or affect its absorption into the skin, but it can help keep potentially irritating side effects in check,” says Dr. Mariwalla. And applying a final layer of lotion with hyaluronic acid and emollients on top of retinol can help to further prevent dryness, peeling, and flakiness, Dr. Mariwalla explains.

## How often can you use hyaluronic acid and retinol?

You can use solo hyaluronic acid whenever you need to hydrate your skin. That can mean everyday or even multiple times a day. As for the hyaluronic acid and retinol combo, that should be used more sparingly. Dr. Marmur and Dr. Mariwalla recommend using your retinol and hyaluronic acid together at three times a week in order to see meaningful results over time. “I think using retinol as part of your

skincare routine should start as early as your 20s,” says Dr. Mariwalla, “and if you use it consistently, it will serve you well in the long run.”

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## Should I use retinol and hyaluronic acid at night?

Our dermatologists agree that retinol is a nighttime thing. “Retinol tends to make your skin photosensitive, which is why I recommend using it as an overnight treatment,” says Dr. Marmur. Hyaluronic acid, on the other hand, can be used in the morning, at night, or both morning and night.

## What should you not mix with retinol?

Exfoliating acids and heavy-hitting active ingredients may cause your skin to become dry, flaky, or irritated if you mix them with retinol. “In general, I tell my patients to stay away from combining a retinol with ingredients like benzoyl peroxide, salicylic acid, or glycolic acid,” cautions Dr. Marmur.

## The takeaway:

Dermatologists agree that mixing hyaluronic acid and retinol is a smart way to improve your skin tone and texture, minimize the look of large pores, smooth lines and wrinkles, and clear up breakouts, all while minimizing the chance of irritation. Each ingredient works great on their own, but together they're a perfect duo—the Bennifer of skincare, if you will.

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## Meet the experts:

- **Ellen Marmur**, MD is a board certified dermatologist at Marmur Medical in New York, NY and the founder of MM Skincare.
- **Kavita Mariwalla**, MD, is a board-certified dermatologist and founder of Mariwalla Dermatology in West Islip, NY.

## Why trust *Cosmopolitan*?

**Gina Way** is an editor, copywriter, and professional skincare junkie. Her work has been featured in *Cosmopolitan*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Oprah Daily*, *Allure*, *Marie Claire*, and more. Follow Gina on Instagram.

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