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A dermatologist explains what happens to skin when you layer too many products

Dr. Ellen Marmur of MMSkincare on pH conflicts, ingredient cancellation, and why one or two actives is enough for most people

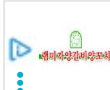


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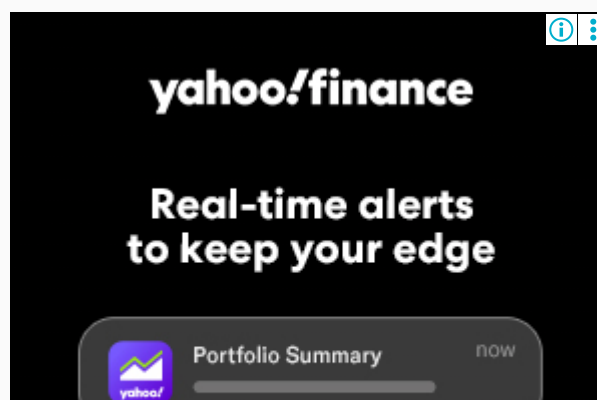
TL;DR: Board-certified dermatologist Dr. Ellen Marmur says the problem with layering five-plus skincare products isn't dilution — it's irritation. Too many actives disrupt the skin barrier, and the warning signs are redness, burning, stinging, peeling, dryness, or new breakouts. Retinoids and exfoliating acids should never be used the same night. For most people, one or two actives is enough. Her baseline routine: [Cetaphil Gentle Skin Cleanser](#), [MMSkincare MMRevive Serum](#), and [EltaMD UV Clear SPF 46](#). If you strip back and reset, expect improvement in days to two weeks for irritation — longer for acne or pigmentation.

The ten-step skincare routine has had a long cultural moment, and the backlash is overdue. Not because any individual product is necessarily bad, but because the math of layering them doesn't work the way most people assume. Dr. Ellen Marmur, board-certified dermatologist and founder of MMSkincare, breaks down what's actually happening on your skin when you stack product on top of product — and how to know when your routine has crossed from helpful into harmful.

What too many products actually does to skin

The intuitive assumption about layering multiple products is that they might dilute each other or compete for absorption. The reality is more specific and more consequential. "The bigger issue is that the more products you layer, especially when they contain active ingredients, the more opportunity there is to create irritation," Dr. Marmur explains. "Your skin has a natural barrier that helps keep moisture in and irritants out, and too many actives can disrupt that balance."

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The skin barrier disruption is the key concept. When the barrier is compromised, skin becomes more reactive to everything — including products that would be fine on their own. Occlusion from layering richer products can be useful for dry skin but counterproductive for acne-prone skin, potentially contributing to clogged pores. pH conflict between ingredients is a real consideration with certain actives, but Dr. Marmur cautions against obsessing over it. "The bigger concern regarding pH is often using too much, too often, rather than one product preventing another from absorbing."

The ingredient combination that causes the most damage

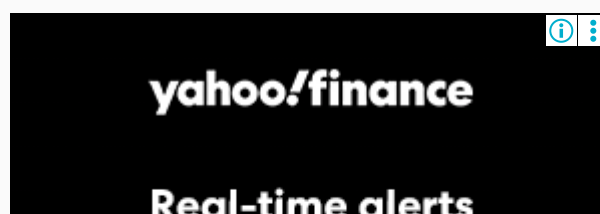
When asked for a specific example of two products that cancel each other out or actively cause harm when layered, Dr. Marmur names the combination most people are most tempted to use together: a strong retinoid and an exfoliating acid like salicylic acid. "Especially if someone uses both frequently, it can be extremely disruptive. Instead of seeing results from these two actives, you will likely notice redness, stinging, dryness, or a tight, uncomfortable feeling. This irritation can actually make acne or discoloration look worse temporarily."

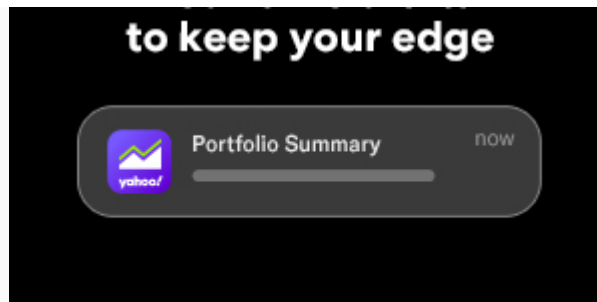
Her solution: use them strategically on different nights rather than simultaneously. The actives aren't the problem — the stacking is.

How many active steps is actually enough

"There isn't a magic number because it depends on the person and what they're trying to treat," Dr. Marmur says. "For most people, one or two properly chosen actives is plenty." Someone treating acne needs a different routine than someone focused on anti-aging or hyperpigmentation — so a universal number is less useful than understanding your specific concern and choosing the one or two ingredients that address it most directly.

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Her baseline recommendation for most skin types: a gentle cleanser like [Cetaphil Gentle Skin Cleanser](#), a well-chosen serum — she recommends the [MMSkincare MMRevive Serum](#) for redness-prone and sensitive skin — and a broad-spectrum SPF like [EltaMD UV Clear SPF 46](#). That's three steps. Most people don't need more than that as a foundation.

The warning signs your routine is too complex

Dr. Marmur's self-diagnosis checklist for a routine that has become too much is specific and practical. "Redness, burning, and stinging when you apply products, peeling, dryness, or breakouts are all signs that your routine is doing too much to your skin and beginning to disrupt your skin barrier." The timing matters: if your skin starts behaving differently after adding products, that change in behavior is the signal.

The reason to add one product at a time rather than five at once is diagnostic: "When you introduce five things all at once, it becomes difficult to determine which is causing the problems." The detective work becomes impossible when the variables multiply simultaneously.

How long a skin reset actually takes

If you strip back to basics, the timeline for seeing whether less is working better depends on what you're treating. "Generally, a routine switch-up can begin to show results in two to four weeks. Irritation and dryness can start improving within days to a couple of weeks once you identify and remove the trigger." For acne or pigmentation, the timeline is longer — these concerns require sustained consistency to evaluate accurately.

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During a reset, Dr. Marmur recommends the simple three-step routine above — cleanser, serum, SPF — until skin calms. Then reintroduce actives one at a time, with enough time between additions to understand how each one is being received. "This will make it easier to figure out what your skin actually likes."

The underlying principle across all of it: skincare that works consistently is more valuable than skincare that impresses on paper. A two-step routine you use every day outperforms a ten-step routine your skin is fighting.



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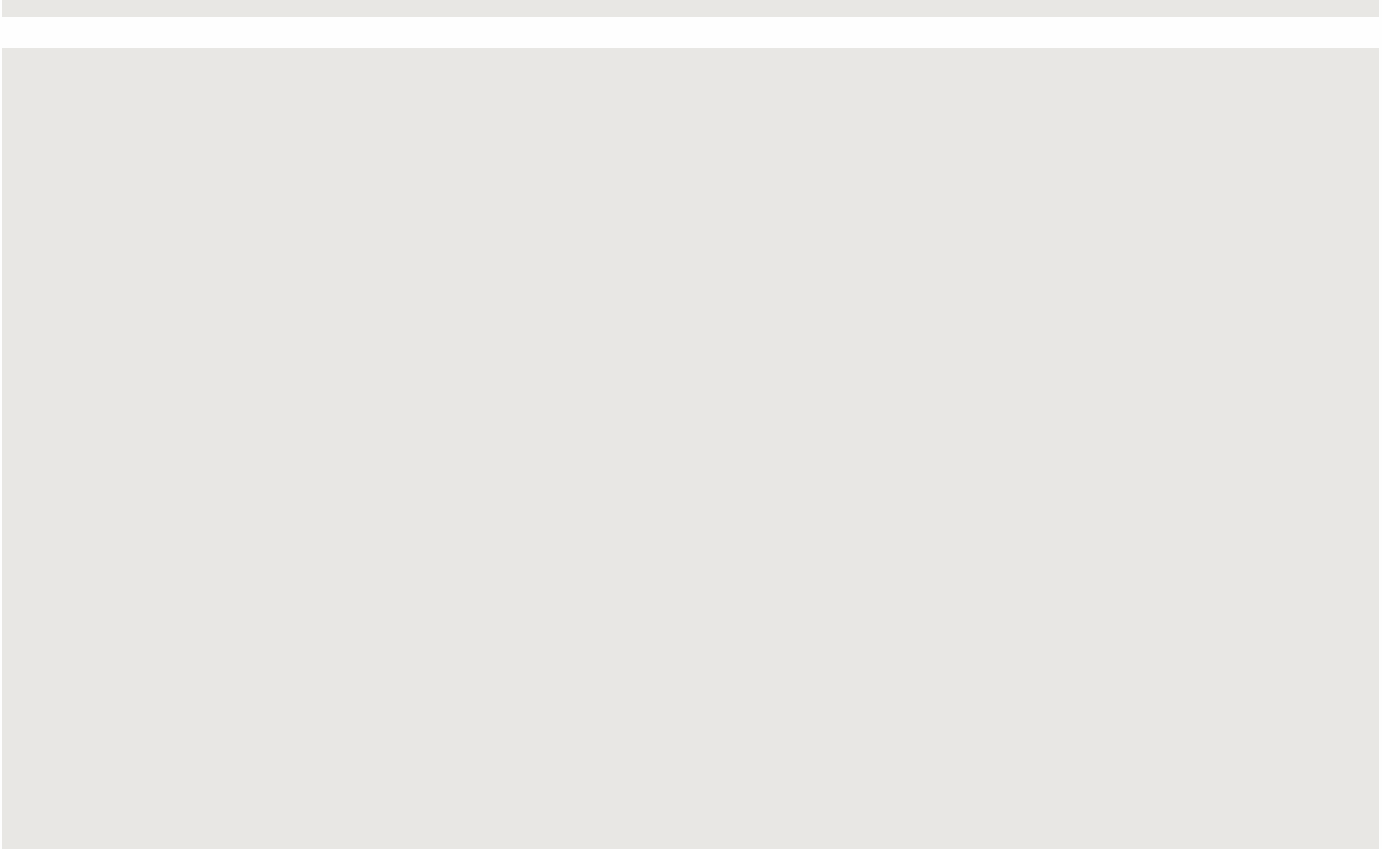
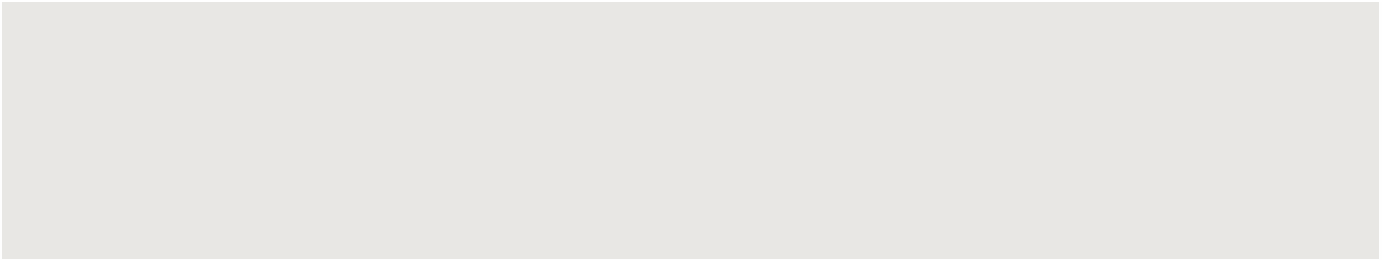
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