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Do you actually need both a serum and a moisturizer? A dermatologist settles the debate

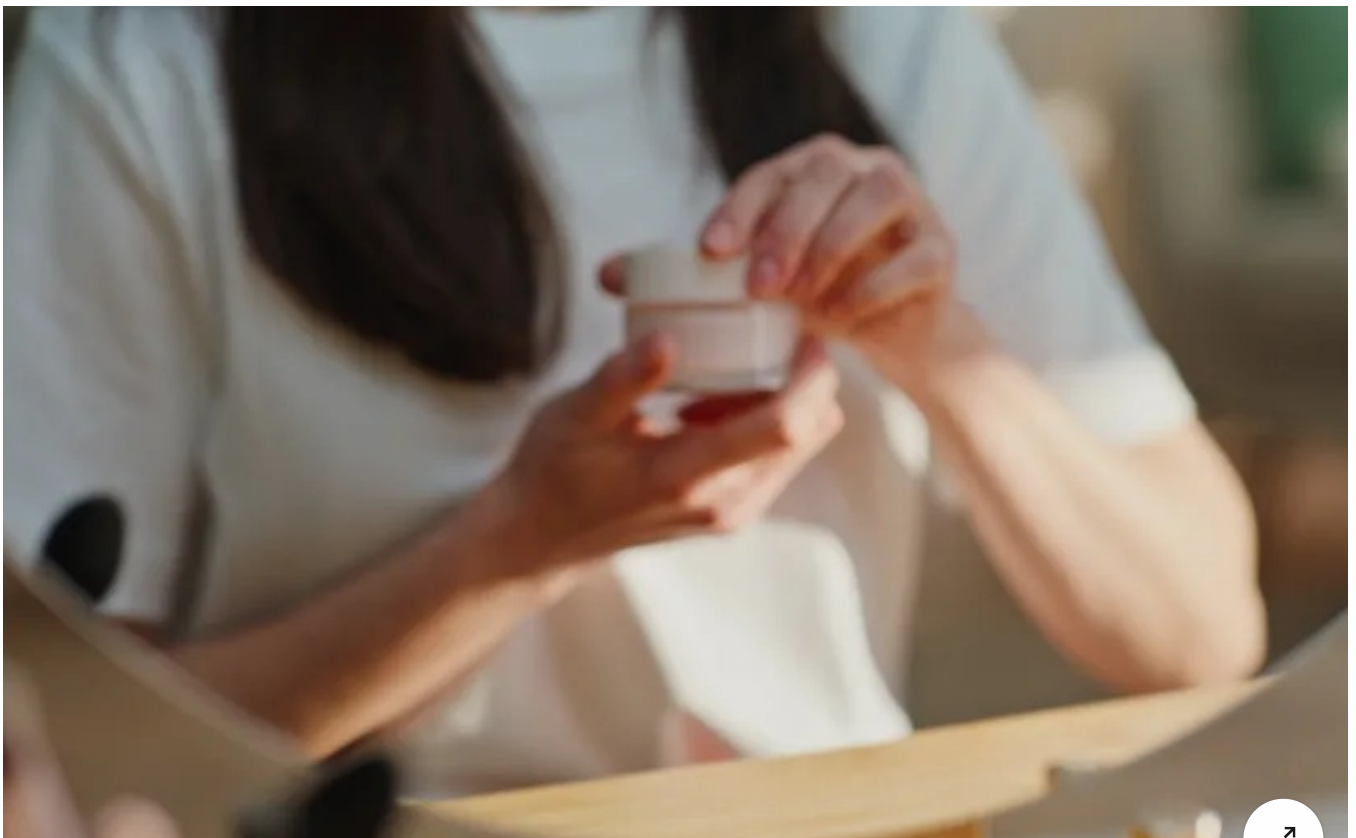
Dr. Ellen Marmur of MMSkincare on when to layer, when to skip, and why the right serum can replace five other products



Amber Katz

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Updated Aug 22, 2026 • 4 min read



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TL;DR: Board-certified dermatologist Dr. Ellen Marmur says the right serum can be the star of your skincare routine and reduce the need for multiple other products. Serums are lightweight and targeted; moisturizers primarily hydrate and prevent water loss. For most skin types, the order is serum first, moisturizer second at night. But the right serum may make a separate moisturizer unnecessary. Key ingredients by concern: dry skin needs hyaluronic acid and glycerin; oily skin benefits from niacinamide and green tea; sensitive skin wants aloe and chamomile; fine lines respond to peptides; dull skin benefits from antioxidants. And more steps don't equal better skin: layering too many actives can cause irritation, redness, and dryness.

The serum-versus-moisturizer question is one that comes up constantly in skincare, and the answer is less binary than most product marketing suggests. Dr. Ellen Marmur, board-certified dermatologist and founder of MMSkincare, breaks down what each product actually does, when you need both, and why the right serum might make your entire routine significantly simpler.

What serums and moisturizers actually do differently

"Although serums and moisturizers can sometimes overlap, they serve different purposes in a skincare routine," Dr. Marmur explains. Serums are lightweight, concentrated products formulated to target specific concerns — reducing redness, addressing pigment, boosting collagen, improving the skin barrier. Moisturizers are primarily focused on hydrating the skin and preventing water loss. The two aren't redundant, but they're not always both necessary either.

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Dr. Marmur notes many patients avoid heavier creams entirely because they don't like the sensation on their skin. This makes a well-chosen serum potentially the better single-product solution. "The trick is to find a serum that is also a moisturizer."

Does everyone need a serum?

Dr. Marmur's position is direct: "I think the right serum can be the star — the most important step of your skincare routine — if you choose the right one for your skin type." The right serum targets what your skin actually needs. If you add a moisturizer, it locks in the serum. But the serum is doing the heavy lifting.

"The right serum can cut down the need for a ten-step skincare routine." That's a statement worth sitting with if you're currently managing multiple products, most of which may be overlapping.

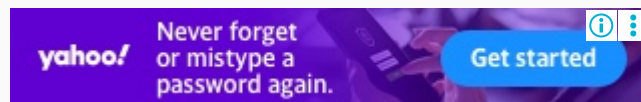
The layering order

At night: apply serum first, then moisturizer. During the day, serums can be worn alone or layered underneath makeup or SPF — their lightweight texture makes them compatible with everything that goes on top. Dr. Marmur recommends [EltaMD UV Clear Broad-Spectrum SPF 46](#) as a lightweight, oil-free option that works for most skin types.

How to choose by skin type and concern

This is where most people get lost. The serum aisle is overwhelming, and the ingredient claims blur together. Dr. Marmur's framework by skin type.

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Dry or dehydrated skin: look for hyaluronic acid, glycerin, aloe, and pro-vitamin B5. A more nourishing texture will feel better and perform better on dry skin.

Oily or acne-prone skin: lighter, easily absorbed formulas are the priority. Niacinamide and green tea are particularly useful for managing excess oil and inflammation.

Sensitive or redness-prone skin: keep the routine simple and look for soothing ingredients: aloe, niacinamide, and chamomile are good starting points. Even botanical ingredients can irritate some people, so patch testing is always worth doing before committing to a new formula.

Fine lines or loss of firmness: look for ingredients with actual clinical evidence behind them. Peptides — specifically Palmitoyl Tripeptide-5, which actively

stimulates collagen production and helps prevent its degradation — and niacinamide are the options Dr. Marmur recommends in this category.

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Dull or uneven-looking skin: antioxidant-rich ingredients like green tea and vitamin E, alongside niacinamide, are the most useful additions.

Dr. Marmur's product picks

[MMSkincare Dynamic Essence](#) combines adaptogens, pre- and probiotics, moisturizers like hyaluronic acid, glycerin, and aloe, plus it works with light employing photodynamic actives designed to help repair, balance, and protect the skin.

The [MMSkincare Balance Serum](#) is great for acne prone skin and oily/combo skin.

The [MMSkincare Repose Serum](#) is perfect for mature, dry, stressed and sensitive skin.

The [MMSkincare Revive Serum](#) combats dry, sensitive, reactive, redness prone and sun damaged skin.

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"For those with normal to dry skin I recommend layering the serum underneath a moisturizer such as the [Vanicream Daily Facial Moisturizer](#) for added hydration and barrier support. I don't usually recommend a moisturizer over a serum," she adds.

Why more layers doesn't mean better skin

"More isn't always best when it comes to skincare. Every additional product can be an additional factor for irritation, especially when you start combining

multiple active ingredients," Dr. Marmur says. For most people, overdoing it leaves skin dry, red, or irritated rather than healthier, the opposite of the intended effect.

She also calls out a pattern she finds counterproductive: brands that market themselves on simplicity by selling single-ingredient products, which actually increases the total number of chemicals a person is exposing their skin to while also multiplying the packaging waste. "I would rather see someone have a simple, more effective routine they use consistently than a ten-step routine that leaves skin irritated or increases environmental impact."

Her baseline recommendation: start with the basics of cleanser, moisturizer, and daily SPF. Once that routine is working, add a serum if you have specific concerns you want to address.

That's it.



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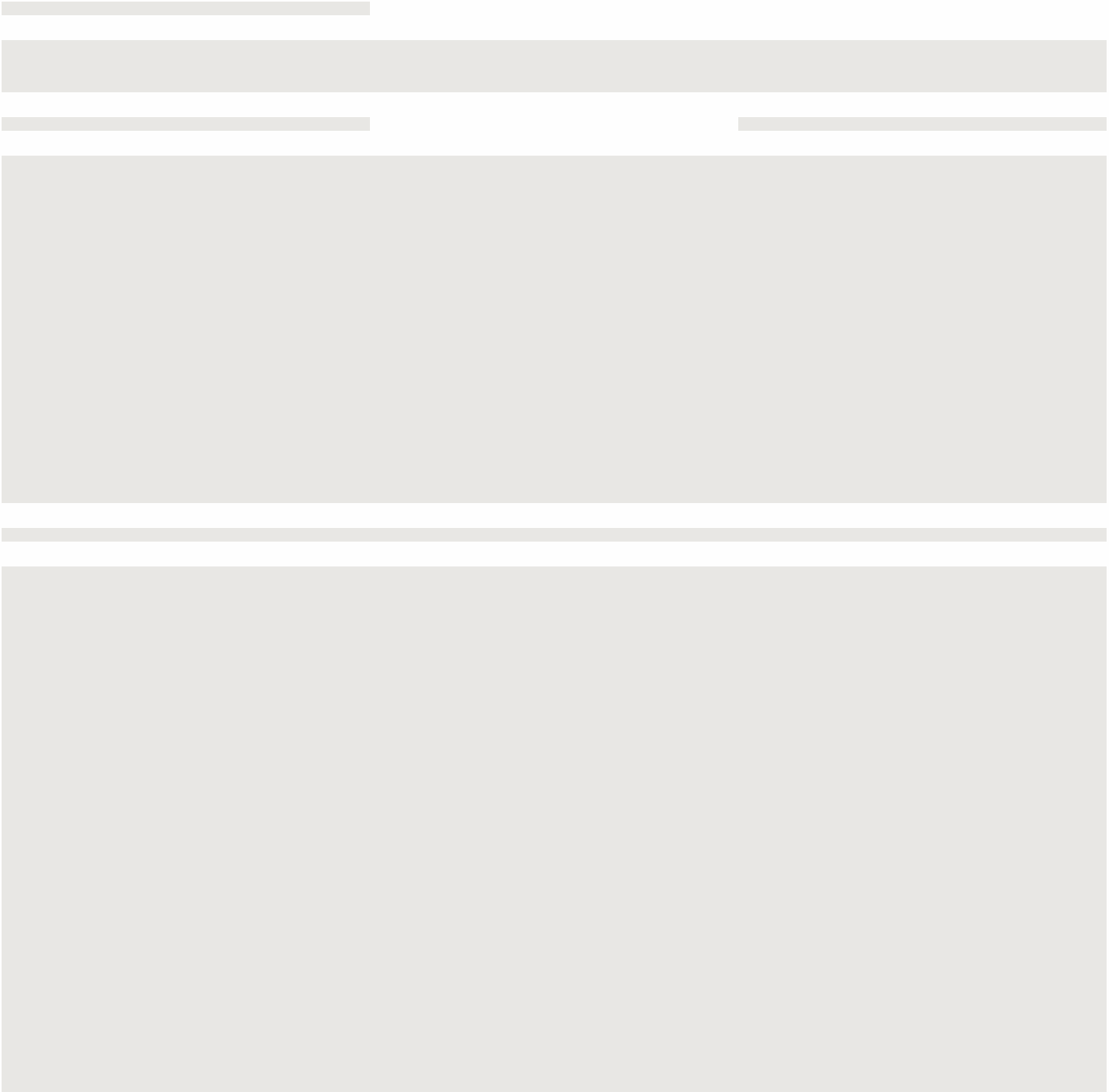
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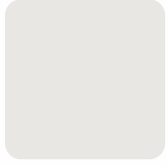
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