

beauty

At first, the idea of slathering *acid* all over your face may not seem very appealing. But don't let the term dissuade you: Acids are appearing in more and more skin-care products because they're the ultimate complexion booster.

The reason goes back to something you learned in chemistry class: "Acids react with different substances, like metals, salts, and bases, to spark chemical reactions," says Dennis Gross, MD, a dermatologist with a private practice in New York City. "On the skin, it's like dropping a small pebble into a very still pond. The gentle ripples on the water's surface are the acid spreading gentle exfoliation onto the top layer of skin." In other words, it makes waves but doesn't harm. Essentially, "acids help shed superficial skin," says dermatologist Michelle Henry, MD, founder of Skin & Aesthetic Surgery of Manhattan.

They're also brilliant multitaskers, "offering a multitude of benefits like smoothing, brightening, and firming," says Howard Sobel, MD, founder of Sobel Skin and an attending dermatologist at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City.

But let's get back to those exfoliation powers for a sec, so we can understand what's going on. Acids effectively get rid of the top layer of dead skin cells without causing excessive irritation or dryness. "They work at removing the 'glue' of dulling skin cells on the outermost part of the skin, sloughing off lackluster cells to reveal a brighter, more radiant complexion," says Dr. Sobel. Acids remove congestion as well, reducing blemishes and the appearance of enlarged pores.

For those new to acids, an easy way to incorporate them is to start with an acid-based cleanser. When you rinse it off, less acid sticks around (the amount of absorption is directly linked to how long it stays on your skin). Though acids—like glycolic, lactic, and salicylic—

can be combined for effective results, it's crucial not to go overboard at the beginning. (We know, it'll be hard now that we've told you of all their magical powers!) "This can break down the skin's protective barrier, leading to inflammation, irritation, dehydration, and flaking," says Dr. Sobel. It's best to start out with a low concentration, such as 2 percent, a few nights a week and gradually build up tolerance, advises Dr. Henry.

To maximize the perks, it's important to understand your skin-care goals. "This is where a dermatologist or an aesthetician comes in to help you [sort through] which products you should be using for your specific skin type or condition," says Ted Lain, MD, chief medical officer at Sanova Dermatology in Austin, Texas. Ready to get started? This guide explains the basics...and then some. Let it rain!



top layer of dead skin cells. (That means it's time to toss your apricot shell scrub.) The other option is, you guessed it, chemical exfoliation, which is why we heart acids so much: It dissolves the dead cells on the outermost layer of skin. Physical exfoliation often irritates the skin and damages the moisture barrier, leaving skin charred and stripped. Of course, you can still overdo it with chemical exfoliation, but it's designed to protect the skin from irritation while treating it.

ANOTHER PERK OF CHEMICAL EXFOLIANTS IS THAT THERE'S LESS CHANCE OF ERROR. "Physical exfoliants are very user dependent," says Dr. Lain. "If you press too hard, it can lead to major issues." Chemical exfoliators, on the other hand, do their job whether or not they're physically manipulated, and they wash off easily. Which is exactly what you want when you're talking about acids and maintaining healthy skin. Convinced?

TO KEEP SKIN FRESH, try an at-home chemical peel with a cocktail of ingredients and multiple acids to gently exfoliate, such as the Dr. Dennis Gross Skincare Alpha Beta Universal Daily Peel (\$17 for 5 peels, sephora.com).

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Acid Test

How the two main options stack up

MOST ACIDS FALL INTO ONE OF TWO CATEGORIES: AHAs AND BHAs.

"Alpha hydroxy acids, a.k.a. AHAs, are a group of natural and synthetic ingredients derived from fruits, sugarcane, or milk and work on most skin types, excluding the very sensitive kind," Dr. Sobel says. AHAs are also water soluble, meaning they're active just on the skin's surface (and don't go any deeper). Common forms of AHAs include glycolic, lactic, citric, and malic.

bacteria, sebum, and pore-clogging debris. That's why they're especially good for treating overactive, oily skin. "They help de-gunk pores and penetrate deeper to fight breakouts," Dr. Gross says. "Salicylic acid is a popular BHA with anti-inflammatory properties and is often prescribed to those suffering from acne and redness."

FYI: BOTH AHAs AND BHAs EXFOLIATE, removing cells to smooth and brighten skin, and to reduce fine lines and wrinkles. "They also both help decrease new acne lesions," Dr. Gross says. "The main difference is that BHAs permeate the lipid layer between skin cells, and AHAs cannot. Again, AHAs only exfoliate the skin's surface." That said, they can work well when formulated together (which is why you might see both AHA and BHA on a product label). Bottom line: Know their differences but also that they're a great pair.

Acids come in a variety of forms—including oil!



Pick Your Potion

Target your needs with the best acid for you. "It's all about your skin type and concern," says Dr. Henry. "Use the strongest acid you can tolerate for the most benefits." Go big or go...back to the shelf.

ACNE Salicylic acid is your friend. "It's a BHA that's a very tiny molecule, so it penetrates the pore where the active oil gland is and sloughs off the clump that's causing the acne," Dr. Henry says. She also recommends a retinoic acid: Start with a low concentration a couple of nights a week and graduate to every other night, then nightly.

FINE LINES Get to know glycolic acid. "It's really great for adult skin

because it can also bring in some moisture," says Dr. Henry. "It may even help to stimulate a bit of collagen." The lower the concentration, the more likely you can use it each day; the higher the concentration, the less frequently you can use it. Sensitive skin? Lactic and mandelic acids are gentler alternatives.

HYPERPIGMENTATION Another win for glycolic. "You'll see a lot of glycolic acid peels because you

really want that superficial exfoliation in this case," Dr. Henry says. "You'll also see mandelic acid peels and lactic acid peels, but my go-to suggestion is a glycolic acid peel at a higher concentration for hyperpigmentation to shed those dark skin cells."

TEXTURE AND DULLNESS Retinoic and glycolic acids are what you should seek out; they turn over past-their-prime cells to leave you with a glowier look.

THE GLOSSARY OF GLOW



Glycolic

An AHA derived from sugarcane, "glycolic is one of the smallest molecular structures in the family of AHAs, so it can penetrate the skin more deeply," Dr. Gross says. "It exfoli-

Hyaluronic

This one isn't like the others. "Hyaluronic acid is defined as an acid, but it's not exfoliative in the exact same way others are," says Dr. Henry. "It's a humectant, so it draws in a lot of water." In fact, it's known for holding nearly 1,000 times its weight in water and attracting and locking in moisture to the skin. It's also a substance your body produces naturally, so it's familiar. The more you know!

2. TRY Sobel Skin Rx Bio Hyaluronic Moisture Cream Extreme, \$95, drsobelksinrx.com

a match
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sistency
s key.

Salicylic

Yep, it's "the" go-to acid for oily acne-prone skin, and this BHA found in plants sloughs off dead skin cells while also quelling inflammation and going up against breakouts. "Those not prone to acne can use it; you just have to be careful because it can be aggressive," Dr. Lain says.

3. TRY Neutrogena Oil-free Acne Wash, \$6.39, target.com

Lactic

A dermatologist favorite for its gentleness, this AHA is derived from milk (there are plant-based alternatives). "Lactic acid not only exfoliates but speeds up cellular turnover and revives collagen production, making skin look firmer and smoother," says Dr. Gross.

4. TRY Kiehl's Ferulic Brew Rejuvenating Facial Essence, \$52, kiehls.com

Ferulic

Found in the cell walls of plants, ferulic neutralizes free radicals formed by pollution and UV rays. "A naturally derived antioxidant, it helps to stabilize others, specifically vitamin C," Dr. Lain says. "Vitamin C is probably the most powerful antioxidant, but it's unstable [so it needs help]."

5. TRY SkinCeuticals C E Ferulic, \$166, skinceuticals.com

