

How to Choose a Face Moisturizer for Acne-Prone Skin

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Acne-prone skin may need several different skin-care products.
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If you suffer from acne, the idea of putting lotion on your face may seem like you're asking for trouble: Acne is usually caused by excess oil and clogged pores, after all, so why would you want to slather on a product that coats your face and adds moisture? Because healthy moisture and unhealthy dirt and oil are different things, and because not all lotions will clog your pores. The important thing is to choose a product that's meant for your skin type and incorporate it correctly into your existing skin-care routine.

Not all people who are prone to acne have very oily skin, but the two do tend to go hand in hand. If this sounds like you, you'll want to choose a moisturizer that's oil-free and not too thick or creamy. (Most will say "oil-free" on the package, but you can also look for ingredients that end in "icone," like silicone -- a hint that the product is mostly water-based.) Gary Goldenberg, MD, assistant professor of dermatology at The Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City,

recommends using a very light formula, like Cetaphil or CeraVe, immediately after washing your face or bathing.

Another option is to try a moisturizer that has built-in acne fighters. Look for a lotion that contains salicylic acid, says Cheryl Karcher, MD, a dermatologist in New York City; this gentle acid causes the top layer of skin to soften and peel off, getting rid of dead skin cells that may be clogging pores and letting clean, fresh skin underneath come to the surface.

"Salicylic acid lotions can be more effective than salicylic acid face washes, since they stay on your face for a longer period of time and will continue working throughout the day," says Karcher. But use these with caution: If you're already using another salicylic acid product or a prescription-strength acne product with retinol, she warns, the combination of the two may be too drying for your skin. You may need to choose just one or the other, or cut back on how often you use one or both products.

Some moisturizers contain alpha hydroxy acids (or AHAs) like glycolic acid. These are also chemical exfoliators that work to slough off dead skin cells, and are a good choice for people who have dry skin but are still prone to acne, redness and discoloration and irritation.

What to Look For (and What to Avoid) in a Healthy Moisturizer

People tend to think that sun exposure helps "dry out" acne or that having a tan helps acne blend in better, but these results are only temporary, says Karcher. In fact, too much sun exposure or sunburn can irritate the skin and make acne even worse in the long run. That's why it's also important to also wear a moisturizer with built-in sunscreen every day, throughout the year, or to use a separate sunscreen over your salicylic acid moisturizer if it does not contain its own. (It's important to note, as well, that acne treatments like salicylic acid products can make the skin even more sensitive to sunburn, so sunscreen is even more important for people who use them!) Look for an SPF of at least 30, recommends the American Academy of Dermatology.

Whether you have acne or not, there are a few general rules you should follow when choosing a moisturizer. Look for products that are unscented, and that uses the term noncomedogenic, meaning that it won't clog pores. Avoid moisturizers with any of the following ingredients, which are used as emulsifiers that can leave a drying, soapy film on your face: polysorbate, stearate, steareth, cetearyl, cetearth, and emulsifying wax. Also stay away from the ingredients polyethylene, polyethylene glycol (or PEG), polyoxyethylene and any words ending in "oxynol" or "eth," which signify the presence of 1,4-dioxane, a chemical that's been classified by the Environmental Protection Agency as a carcinogen.

Always apply your moisturizer as soon as you get out of the shower or towel off your face after washing it. (If you're using a separate acne treatment, apply that first and then put moisturizer over top.) For most people, washing your face and applying moisturizer twice a day -- first thing in the morning and again before you go to bed -- is all you need; washing more often can dry your face out, and applying lotion more often can upset your skin's natural oil balance and cause more breakouts -- no matter how good your moisturizer is.