

Do You Need to Use Toner?

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Toner's long been the ugly stepsister of skincare: you *have* to cleanse, and you *must* moisturizer, but tone? Eh. Who cares? Well thanks to a rapidly increasing interest in Korean skincare stateside, toners are taking their rightful place amongst the mighty serums and creams on beauty counters. But why? And what do they do? Consider this your factsheet for the water-like liquid.

What is toner?

A toner can be a lotion or a liquid solution, meant to provide your face with that “deep clean” feeling. “Depending on the type of skin, a toner can have several actions,” says Dr. Elizabeth Tanzi, co-director of the Washington Institute of Dermatologic Laser Surgery in Washington, DC. “Most people use a toner as an astringent to remove excess oil or makeup that their cleanser leaves behind. Others use it to balance the pH of the skin after cleansing.” It can also be used for extra soothing, hydration and anti-aging benefits. In other words, toner can be a bit of a cure-all depending on the formula and your individual needs.

How do you use toner?

Traditionally, toning is the step sandwiched between washing and moisturizing. “You apply a small amount on a cotton pad to the face and neck, usually avoiding the eye area depending on the formula,” says make-up artist Kristofer Buckle. “Do this right after cleansing the face, and before serums, moisturizers and creams are applied.” Dab, dab, dab. Let your skin dry. Hydrate. It’s quick and easy.

Who should use a toner?

Anyone can use toner, but women who struggle with excess oil production and blemishes should consider this extra step. Try a toner with glycolic acid, which Dr. Tanzi says will “remove all excess oil and continue to treat the skin to keep the pores clean” if you have the traditional toner-busting combo of oily and acne-prone skin. Peter Thomas Roth Glycolic Acid 10-Percent Toning Complex Clarifying Toner fits the bill.

What other ingredients should you look for in a toner?

It’s best to skip toners with alcohol, it’s overly drying, strips the skin of moisture, and ultimately does more harm than good. Look instead for ingredients like salicylic acid (if acne is your biggest skin woe) or enzymes to brighten your complexion and encourage cell renewal (if anti-aging is your major concern). Things like aloe extract, glycerin, rosewater, or calendula will soothe and draw moisture into the skin. “I use all of the Dr. Brandt toners,” Buckle says. “There is literally a solution for whatever your problem, and my clients always see a difference.” Other great options are Fresh Black Tea Age-Delay Instant Infusion for anti-aging, Sisley Floral Spray Mist for soothing, and Lancome Tonique Pure Focus for acne defense.

Bottom line: Is toner worth it?

Ultimately, that’s for you to decide. Skipping toner won’t be as bad for your skin as skipping cleansing, but working one into your routine can make a visible difference—especially if you have oily skin, acne, hyperpigmentation, or dullness. “It really depends on the person,” says Dr. Gary Goldenberg, Assistant Clinical Professor of Dermatology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai. “Some say it’s just an extra step in your beauty routine, and an extra expense, but for the right person? Toners are great.”