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This Korean Skincare Expert Hates the Ingredient Americans Love

 by LINDSEY METRUS

This year, in particular, I've jumped on the retinol bandwagon *hard*. As in, I'm strapped in, the engine's running, and I'm hitting the gas pedal, ideally with the gear in reverse. (Get it? Anti-aging? Turning back the clock? I digress.) I'm so invested in its promise to prevent wrinkles that *not* using it worries me. It's such a widely touted ingredient by all the heavy hitters in the skincare biz (top estheticians, celebrity dermatologists) that it's practically a given when we ask someone to spill the contents of their medicine cabinet.

That is, until a recent chat with Alicia Yoon, skincare guru and founder of Korean skincare brand Peach & Lily. "I never use retinol," Yoon told me matter-of-factly. Suddenly, the brakes were pumped on my retinol getaway car. Yoon has skin like a baby's and a wealth of skincare knowledge, so I immediately started to question my own choices. Her reasoning? Retinol thickens the skin, which takes away from the translucent "glass" skin Korean women love. I wanted, nay, *needed* to know more, so I prodded Yoon for more on her aversion toward retinol (and what she uses instead).



"For me personally, I don't like to use retinol because I have very sensitive skin and there is always an adjustment period to retinols," she explains. "During this period, skin can become more fragile—thinner, basically—and results in increased sensitivity, and at times, peeling and flaking. I find that a lot of my clients also struggle with the initial adjustment period of using a retinol. On the other hand, with consistent use, after that adjustment period, **there are studies that show that retinol can actually help thicken the epidermis.** This isn't a bad thing, as it means stronger, firmer, more resilient skin.

"However, interestingly, **in Korea, thin skin (not the kind that is thinned out and more sensitized, but a thin, translucent texture) is often seen as more transparent, like glass, and more youthful-looking.** When I interview top dermatologists and estheticians in Korea, one of the most popular requests is for people to achieve *too-myung-pibu*, which translates roughly to *see-through skin*. These skin experts say that their challenge is in helping clients maintain this thin, beautiful, translucent skin, which could potentially be compromised with a thicker epidermis (the outer layer of the skin) while also ensuring there is plenty of firmness (boosting collagen production in the dermis, the place collagen sits) and achieving a healthy skin barrier. This is often compared to skin that we have as children—there's a thin translucency, yet plenty of collagen and firmness. This is, in part, apparently a reason that retinols are not as commonly sought after as the must-have ingredient for anti-aging.

"The other notion is that **Korean skincare is all about consistency and achieving results over time, rather than dramatically and instantly.** Proper care from an earlier age where the main focus is preventative skincare is a common skincare philosophy. And retinols are seen as a bit harsher and therefore, a more last-resort type ingredient—and even then, used at first, in pretty small dosages. There are, to be sure, many proven benefits of retinol for the skin; however, for me, personally, **I don't like the harsh adjustment period and am striving to hold onto that delicate balance of translucent skin while still working on keeping skin healthy and firm.** Perhaps, in the future, I may turn to retinols, but so far, I haven't used retinols in my routine and have been happy with other ways to keep my skin healthy and minimize premature aging."

Interestingly, unlike we Americans who thirst for the "one" product that's going to turn back the clock, Yoon doesn't believe such a thing exists. "I don't view anti-aging as something one product can deliver. **It's more a holistic approach to skincare (and nutrition and lifestyle).** When it comes to an anti-aging skincare routine, it's about consistency and also ensuring foundational skincare pillars are met. First, skin needs to be properly cleansed. That means **no harsh cleansers that disrupt the skin barrier** and a cleansing routine that will ensure impurities are effectively drawn out of skin.

"I find **the double-cleansing ritual that's so popular in Korea to be very effective.** Using an oil-based cleanser to first gently cast out those oil-based impurities to keep pores clear, followed up with a gentle water-based cleanser that's hydrating helps tremendously in keeping skin pure and healthy. Another pillar is **ensuring skin is properly hydrated**, which can be effectively done by using **humectants that draw moisture to the skin** and using formulas that can sink into skin to deliver deeper hydration. Adequately hydrated skin helps the skin environment to remain healthy and functioning in an optimal way. The last pillar is to **protect skin by using an SPF**, daily, and ensuring there are plenty of antioxidants in your skincare routine to combat the free radicals that can lead to premature aging."



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Fascinated by this, I decided to consult with dermatologists Kenneth Mark, MD, and **Kristina Goldenberg, MD**, for their thoughts. In response to retinol "thickening" the skin, Mark agrees that this is factual. "Just like retinol helps with wrinkles, **it thickens the skin by stimulating collagen production.**"

However, in the literal sense of making your skin tougher, Goldenberg firmly claims the thickening action is a "myth:" "Retinol does not 'thicken' the skin, instead it keeps the skin looking and feeling youthful. Retinol helps exfoliate superficial dead layers of the skin, bringing on new, fresh skin. It helps stimulate new collagen production and delays the appearance of fine lines and wrinkles." In other words, **retinol bolsters new skin cells and plumps them with collagen**, but all in all, your skin won't necessarily be "thicker."

For those of us committed to retinol, thankfully, both doctors are on board for using it in the long-term. Says Goldenberg, "There is no such thing as using a retinol too long. In fact, **the longer a retinol product is used, the better.** The beneficial effects of this ingredient are enhanced when it's used for an extended period of time. Using it for 20 years or longer will only help keep the skin looking and feeling youthful. It should, however, be **used more sparingly during the summer months because of increased photosensitivity** and risk of sunburn and hyperpigmentation. If you have sensitive skin, you should also use a retinol more sparingly in the beginning until the skin begins to tolerate it better."

Have we scared you away from retinol? If so, know that you don't have to use the buzzy ingredient to reap its age-reversing benefits. "For those who can't tolerate retinol, they can use **alpha hydroxy acids, hyaluronic acid, peptides, and antioxidants,**" says Mark. Goldenberg adds that **glycolic acid**, a chemical exfoliant has "effects similar to those of a retinol," though it's important to note that acids still have the potential to irritate sensitive skin.



Retinol be damned, all of this talk made us wonder what's in the skincare regimen that makes Yoon's complexion look as glowing and youthful as it does. Below, her full routine:

- 1.** Double cleanse with the Shangpree S-Energy Cleansing Gel, and then follow up with the Shangpree S-Energy Facial Mousse Cleanser. I love the Cleansing Gel, as it removes all makeup, but it doesn't irritate skin. The Facial Mousse is great, as it's a low pH cleanser that doesn't disrupt the skin barrier. It also doubles as a treatment—I leave it on for five minutes in the mornings sometimes, and then wash it off, and my skin is left completely supple, soft, and nourished.
- 2.** Be the Skin Botanical Nutrition Power Toner—it has no alcohol, tons of antioxidants, and royal jelly. All in all, it balances pH, hydrates intensively, and nourishes skin.
- 3.** Lately, I am using the Cremorlab Mineral Treatment Essence. It's incredibly hydrating but also action-packed with niacinamide, fermented ingredients and vital vitamins and minerals from their thermal water that helps fortify skin.
- 4.** One of my go-to serums is the Shangpree S-Energy Long Lasting Concentrated Serum. It includes skullcap callus extract, a proprietary blend of botanicals that they call super antioxidants, a violet herb complex, panthenol, propolis, and hydrolyzed silk that all work together to help facilitate skin cell regeneration, fight free radicals, repair, and hydrate skin.
- 5.** I have dry skin, so I always use an oil to supplement the lack of oils on my skin. The aromatica argan oil works nicely for me, and of course, argan oil is also antioxidant-rich.
- 6.** I have been using the Peach Slices Citrus Honey Aqua Glow as a serum plus moisturizer. It's formulated to both soak into skin and help create a barrier to seal everything in. Healthy skin is also about skin that is in harmony—fixing one problem that causes another can be avoided by keeping skin balanced and in harmony.
- 7.** I struggle with under-eye bags, so I use eye creams that help brighten the eye area and hydrates deeply. I turn to this one often.
- 8.** In the mornings, I SPF, always, and have been loving this one from Lagom for how invisible it is, with both UVA and UVB protection.
- 9.** Once or twice a week, I exfoliate and turn to my trusty and gentle Be the Skin Non-Stimulus Facial Polisher.
- 10.** Once a week, I also use this vitamin C treatment, as it really helps fight free radicals and lighten dark spots. This formula is used in many skin clinics in Korea for how potent it is. I also do masks a few times a week after cleansing and toning and before moisturizers. Sometimes, I do serums even after masking since skin is so prepped to absorb product. I use just a tiny amount though, as a little goes a long way when your skin is so hydrated and able to more easily absorb serums.