



Are Retinol and Acids Safe for the Summer?



Drew Carlos

June 5, 2019

Retinol and acids are staple skincare products. And as a duo, they go from staple skincare to holy grail. But as the seasons shift and we enter summer, is it safe to use the sometimes-harsh ingredients in the season we also find ourselves constantly in the sun?

According to **Gary Goldenberg, M.D.**, assistant clinical professor of dermatology at The Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital, “there are many misconceptions about this.”

So, dermatologists break it down for us — from misconceptions to must-dos — when it comes to using retinol and skincare acids in the summer. And as it turns out, the recommendations are the same for both. And, thanks to the moisture in the air, summer is actually the best time to try out the duo.

“Skin is usually less dry in the summer, so in general, the products are better tolerated in summer than in winter, but only if used properly,” says Charisse Dolitsky, M.D., dermatologist at Schweiger Dermatology Group on Long Island.

But what does each product do, exactly? “Retinol is a topically applied product that is derived from vitamin A. When it penetrates the skin, it is converted to retinoic acid, which has anti-aging effects,” says Dolitsky. “It can gradually reduce fine lines and uneven skin pigmentation.”

On the other side of the spectrum are the skincare acids. “A skincare acid is a product that has acidic pH. These products are usually used to help improve skin tone and texture and work by normalizing the outer layer of the skin called [the] epidermis,” says Goldenberg. But there are different types — alpha hydroxy acids and beta hydroxy acids. “The [acids] commonly encountered in cosmetic products are glycolic acid, lactic acid and citric acid ... They can reduce clogged pores and acne, help improve skin texture, radiance and fine lines,” adds Dolitsky. Acids can be used in the morning to slough off dead skin cells that overturn during the night, leaving glowing skin behind.

So, how do these products react during the summer? The simple answer: the same as the rest of the year. And it is safe to use them year-round — although, you should consult with your dermatologist before adding a new product into your routine.

But there are a few aspects that should call for heightened awareness during the summer (or anytime you will face prolonged sun exposure).



1. “Ultraviolet light can inactivate retinols and diminish their effectiveness,” says Dolitsky. For this reason, both dermatologists recommend applying retinol at night, followed by moisturizer. And while it is perfectly fine to start retinol use in the summer, common side effects can be redness, flaking and peeling — but know that this is not seasonal dependent. “Patients have to know that in many cases the skin can become red and scaly as it’s getting used to retinol,” says Goldenberg. “This is sometimes confused for a sunburn.”
2. The sun is something to be cognizant of, even though both products are entirely safe to use. In fact, it is the biggest sticking point for both Goldenberg and Dolitsky. “The products thin the outer skin barrier and they cause increased sensitivity to ultraviolet light,” says Dolitsky. And this is cause for concern as it does leave your skin more prone to sunburn (not to be confused with the side effects). Dolitsky says to invest in a mineral sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or higher, and if you are going to be in the sun, use UPF clothing along with a wide-brimmed hat.
3. And if you do happen to sunburn your face? It is best to take a step back from your routine. “If you get a sunburn, you should not apply anything potentially irritating to your skin. Instead, use plenty of moisturizer and restart your routine once skin improves,” says Goldenberg. If you choose to apply retinol over a sunburn, it could cause irritation and stinging, according to Dolitsky. She recommends holding off on applying retinol and acids for about one week or until the sunburn has healed.

The bottom line? Acids and retinol are approved for summer use, as long as you have a strong sun-protection plan in place.

“If someone feels that they will be in a situation in which it will be impossible for them to diligently follow a sun protection routine,” says Dolitsky, “I recommend temporarily discontinuing [use].”