

THE PEEL SESSIONS

ON A QUEST FOR THE PERFECT GLOW, IT'S EASY TO OVERDO IT. BY FLORENCE KANE



Dr. Macrene Alexiades-Armenakas, an assistant professor of dermatology at Yale School of Medicine and the director of the Dermatology and Laser Surgery Center in New York. “It puckers like the material would if wrapped tightly on something and looks like if you pricked it with a pin, a clear fluid would come out.”

This is the over-exfoliated face. For the past few decades, the most dominant recipe for radiant skin has called for removing the dead layers of epidermis to reveal newer, brighter, less-wrinkled skin. But not everyone knows just how often to slough, and some women have been misled into thinking that the more often you do it, the better. Or women exfoliate constantly to ensure that anti-aging or anti-acne serums are delivered more effectively. Exfoliate too frequently, though, with chemical peels or Retin A, and you could encounter a multitude of problems: redness, a strange waxy look and, over time, the thin skin Alexiades-Armenakas described. It can look crepe-like and translucent, with capillaries showing (if you're Caucasian), and is far more prone to fine lines, not to mention increasingly vulnerable to cancer-causing UV rays, than untreated skin. For those with darker complexions, overpeeling can also cause hyper-pigmentation, which can be permanent.

“I saw a patient the other day who told me, ‘I’m addicted to acids. I can’t do without them,’” Alexiades-Armenakas said. “She needed an anti-inflammatory to undo the redness and damage, but I couldn’t give her a steroid because that can thin the skin even more. For people who get addicted to exfoliation, it’s very hard to get their skin back to a normal rhythm.”

When used properly, these acids — alpha hydroxy, glycolic, salicylic, lactic — will strip off the top layer and stimulate new collagen growth. An experienced dermatologist or facialist knows how to choose the correct type and the schedule at which it’s applied. Any “addict,” however, can get around a strict peel regimen by cheating on her regular doctor and going elsewhere. Also, Enterprise said, “I know there are many doctors who use peels for wrinkles. If you keep peeling someone to get to the other side of a wrinkle, that skin is going to be so thin.”

Finding the ideal combination of peel strength and frequency is no simple matter, said the dermatologist Dr. Fredric Brandt. There are superficial peels, he explained, which just remove some of the top layer, and then there are “medium depth, which go probably to the border of the dermis and epidermis, and deeper ones, like the old phenol peels that are rarely used anymore, that go into the dermis or mid-dermis.” Additionally, there are now options like carbon dioxide lasers and even stronger fractional lasers. A good dermatologist, Dr. Brandt added, will be sensitive to a variety of factors — lighter peels for younger patients, deeper for those with sun damage — so that there’s less of a need to worry about thinning your skin.

“It’s a fine dance you have to do with your clients,”

Enterprise said. “Peels are amazing if you do them for a particular reason; if you play tennis and you’ve got that thick skin that makes you very ruddy. But if you’re a woman in your 70s or 80s and you’ve smoked cigarettes and have skin that looks like tissue paper, we want to do anything we can to build it up.”

At-home treatments can have their downsides as well. Retinoids like Retin A increase skin turnover and should be used at the correct strength and frequency. “Everyone used to put it on every night — you brush your teeth, you put on your Retin A,” Enterprise recalled. “Cheeks were getting very thin and people had that glossy look. That waxy skin makes you look older and can make you look dated in the same way your hair or makeup can.”

Abuse of drugstore or beauty-emporium products is also a danger. “I’ve done R&D for a large cosmetic company, and unfortunately to launch these over-the-counter peeling agents, the rule of thumb is to recommend twice-weekly use,” Alexiades-Armenakas said. And why is that? “Because if you don’t use it that often, you’re not going to see any results. It’s so weak compared to a dermatologist’s peel, and to compensate for this they have people overuse it.”

Michelle Harper, a porcelain-skinned fixture on best-dressed lists, believes that there isn’t a one-size-fits-all strategy. “It’s very much like diets,” she said. “There’s

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no one that works for everyone.” To maintain her enviable complexion, Harper, a brand consultant who also sits on the board of her sister-in-law Tata Harper’s namesake beauty company, keeps up with the latest research and has tried a range of products and treatments. She uses lasers, microdermabrasion, acids and retinols, all monitored by her doctor. The results? “Fantastic,” she said. “My skin has become more resilient and smoother over time.”

It’s a commitment, to say the least. Harper’s routine includes five different acids, plus monthly visits to Dr. David Colbert for his Triad Medical Facial. “I look at myself and say, ‘O.K., am I having acne, whiteheads or blackheads?’” she said. “If so, I’ll move toward beta hydroxy acids.” For dry, flaky skin with fine lines, she goes with alpha hydroxy acids like lactic and kojic (for lightening of age spots), combined with the glycolic acid in Brad’s Biophotonic Ultra Peel or Vivité Vibrance Therapy. For something stronger, she turns to Colbert MD Intensify Facial Disks, which provide light microdermabrasion action and contain bromelain and lactic acid. She’s careful not to overdo it, though, since “the reality is, you need a barrier on your skin.”

Of course, disrupting that barrier at just the right rate — either by peels, Retin A, lasers or other means — is how you stimulate the skin into creating collagen. Alexiades-

Armenakas is at work on a new method for doing so, testing pixelated radiofrequency technology and ultrasound to push anti-acne or anti-aging drugs into the skin. It’s another form of fractional resurfacing, whose advantage, she said, is that most of the epidermis is left intact. Eventually, according to the dermatologist, this science will make its way into an over-the-counter product, in the form of a hand-held roller.

There remains, however, the conundrum of what to do until those futuristic gadgets arrive. For now, Alexiades-Armenakas recommends relying on a much older technology — that of the body itself. “The skin turns over every 28 days,” she said. “I’m of the firm belief that you’re better off having a strong peel just once a month at most, giving the skin a chance to recover, rebound and rejuvenate itself.” ■

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AT HOME

1. Avon Anew Clinical Pro Line Eraser Treatment Developed in concert with the company that pioneered alpha hydroxy acid, this product is formulated to boost collagen production by deactivating collagen blockers in the skin. \$40; avon.com.

2. By Terry Hyaluronic Hydra-Primer For those suffering the effects of too much acid exfoliation, this new primer, which contains hydrating hyaluronic acid, makes red and shiny skin more matte, helping makeup to go on smoothly. \$59; byterry.com.

3. Eileen Harcourt Pumpkin Mask Harcourt, a facialist, doesn’t encourage her clients to self-apply glycolic or salicylic acids, but she will send them home with a gentle peeling mask like this one. \$40; (212) 300-4416; eharcourts.com.

IN OFFICE

4. Joanna Vargas Skincare Fall Renewal Peel Vargas starts with a diamond exfoliation, followed by a pineapple enzyme peel, L.E.D. light therapy and oxygen treatment. The goal: do away with dead-cell buildup caused by sun exposure and sunscreen. \$175; joannavargas.com.

5. Debra Jaliman M.D. Pomegranate Peel The dermatologist’s antioxidant-rich fruit-acid peel takes time to produce results but shouldn’t cause redness like stronger acids do. \$150; jaliman.com.



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hat does the ideal complexion look like? “You want your skin nice and smooth, almost powdery,” said the medical aesthetician Dangene Enterprise, whose Institute of Skinovation is located at Manhattan’s Core Club. “And it should have a nice glow, like you’re a 3-year-

old who just woke up from a nap.”

With all the treatments, procedures and products at our fingertips today, that glow she describes is certainly attainable. Yet the search for perfection often leads to just the opposite. Instead of achieving plump, soft skin, some women are winding up with visages that are “thin and kind of stretched, almost like Saran wrap,” according to

Thin skinned
Facial peels are one ingredient for radiance, but they can be risky as well.