

Does Retinol Have a Dark Side?

State of Skin is our monthlong exploration of what women love, hate, and need to know about their skin — from the most common concerns to the best kept secrets in beauty.

By **Wendy Kaur** | Updated Nov 15, 2019 @ 4:00 pm

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No doubt about it: retinol has taken on superhero status in the skincare routines of women everywhere. The purest form of vitamin A, retinol fights acne, does away with wrinkles, and pumps up collagen — it's like having your own personal superpower.

...Or is it? Some beauty experts, including Tata Harper, founder of her namesake natural skincare brand, and celeb estheticians like Carrie Lindsey and Shani Darden have said that retinol shouldn't be used long-term, because it can eventually thin the skin and, as a result, even accelerate signs of aging. *Cue mass panic*

Before you banish your retinol for good, here's what two leading dermatologists have to say about the drama surrounding this hero skincare ingredient.

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How can retinol cause skin thinning?

First, a refresher on how retinol actually works: "Retinol removes and exfoliates unnecessary dead skin cells, which causes the basal layer — or the stem cell layer of the skin — to produce newer and more healthy cells," says Devika Icecreamwala, M.D., founder of Icecreamwala Dermatology in Berkeley, California.

"If you're overusing your retinol, or if you're using a retinol that's too strong for you, it can lead to peeling, irritation, and excessive dryness, which may have led to retinol's association with skin thinning," she says. "This will make your skin look older and accentuate wrinkles" — which is probably not what you're going for when you start using the stuff.

And there's no question that retinol makes your skin more sensitive to the sun. "A sunburn can definitely cause skin thinning," Dr. Icecreamwala says.

What is skin thinning anyway — and how does it fast track signs of aging?

Skin thickness is partially determined by your genetics. "Those with more melanin in the skin tend to have thicker skin naturally," she explains — meaning lighter skin tones tend to have thinner skin than darker skin tones. Melanin is also protective against UV damage which helps prevent UV-induced skin thinning.

However, that doesn't mean the thickness is completely out of your control. According to Dr. Icecreamwala, "some people can develop thin skin over time through environmental exposures (such as ultraviolet radiation) and lifestyle choices (such as smoking)."

These factors can all compromise the integrity of the skin — and therefore make it more susceptible to damage, Dr. Icecreamwala explains. This, in turn, "accelerates the aging process."

However, derms say if you're using retinol correctly, you'll actually thicken your skin.

"The idea that retinol thins the skin is false," asserts David Colbert, M.D., co-founder of the New York Dermatology Group.

Dermatologists point to many clinical studies refuting the idea that retinol thins the skin — and that there's no danger in using retinoids themselves if you're adding them to your skincare routine safely.

"Retinol will not decrease the skin barrier if used in the correct dosage," agrees Dr. Icecreamwala. In fact, she says it can actually do the opposite: "Because retinol is collagen and elastin-boosting, it can actually help thicken the skin over time if used appropriately."

"If the skin barrier is compromised by your use of retinol, you are using way too much of it and way too strong a dose. That's why it's so important to find a retinol dose that is right for you, under the guidance of a dermatologist," Dr. Icecreamwala says.

"Retinol should only cause irritation for the first few weeks as your skin adjusts, which isn't enough time for skin thinning to develop," she explains. "If you are getting continual irritation from your retinol, you most likely need to switch to a lower strength and decrease the frequency of use." (Again, signs that your skin is not tolerating retinol include redness, dryness, itches, flaking and peeling.)

Even if you have darker — and therefore naturally thicker — skin, you should still proceed with caution. "If the retinol you're using is too strong for your skin causing inflammation, darker skin tones may have a higher risk of discoloration, or hyperpigmentation, from the use of it," she adds.

Dr. Icecreamwala recommends starting with a retinol that is 0.3 or 0.5 percent.

"Using a higher level of retinol right off the bat can cause skin irritation for sure, especially if you have thinner (and therefore more sensitive) skin," she says. "I recommend that people start using retinol two to three times a week in the beginning, increasing to nightly use if your skin can tolerate it."

As your skin gets used to the lesser strength retinol, you can slowly increase the retinol percentage to possibly a 1.0 percent, or transition to a prescription Retin-A, she suggests.

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When, if ever, should you stop using retinol, or start using less of it?

If you're wondering if you're clear to use your retinol as a long-term anti-aging strategy without negative side effects (like compromising the strength of your skin), both derms agree the answer is yes — in fact, you'll need to use it continuously if you want to keep benefiting from the effects, says Dr. Colbert.

There are a few things to keep in mind, though. "Be careful not to use too many products at once [in combination with retinol]," advises Dr. Colbert. "These include glycolic acid, salicylic acid, and abrasive agents. In these cases it may cause irritation."

"I absolutely recommend retinol as long-term anti-aging products," Dr. Icecreamwala agrees — "but it's important to remember it can be drying for those with sensitive skin." For these people, or those with naturally thin or dry skin, "they need to use a facial oil alongside their retinol." (He recommends his own Colbert MD Ilumino Face Oil as one option.)

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Keep in mind that your skin's needs can change over time, or even over the course of the year. "Over time, our skin doesn't hold on to as much moisture. If you're noticing that your skin has become more dry as you age, or during the winter season, decrease the frequency and strength of your retinol," Dr. Icecreamwala suggests.

Luckily, if you've tried retinol in lower doses and your skin truly can't tolerate it, you have other anti-aging options. Two ingredients to try: bakuchiol, a natural alternative to retinol, and PHAs, a gentle-yet-effective acid that's growing in popularity.

The bottom line? If used correctly and safely, retinol doesn't have to have a dark side.

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