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Should You or Shouldn't You?

Top docs debate the pros and cons of popular anti-aging treatments



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By Wendy Schmid

In the beauty realm there isn't a frown line you can't flatten, a dark spot you can't brighten, or a wrinkle you can't plump. But pros sometimes disagree on the best way to fix what ails you. Read on to learn more about the benefits and drawbacks of everything from retinol to filler.

RETINOIDS

The Pros: Most derms consider retinoids—prescription products such as Retin-A, Avage and Differin, all of which are derivatives of vitamin A—the

MVPs of skincare. (The lower-strength version, available in over-the-counter products, is called retinol.) Rx-only retinoids have been FDA-approved for 40 years, and are a go-to product because of their stellar resurfacing ability. "A small amount of the active ingredient, tretinoin, is converted to trans-retinoic acid, which has been shown to increase cell turnover and stimulate collagen production, thickening the skin," says Los Angeles dermatologist Jessica Wu, author of *Feed Your Face*. This means that with regular use, you can end up not just with softer skin and lighter brown spots, but fewer fine lines.

The Cons: Though they may sound pretty perfect, there is a potential downside to retinoids. Austin-based dermatologist Ruthie Harper, MD, points out that "just as with prescription retinoids, anyone using over-the-counter retinol may also experience redness, irritation, and sun sensitivity." Your skin may also look flaky when you first start using a vitamin A-based product because of accelerated cell turnover.

The Bottom Line: For most women, retinoid products can be an effective way to get smoother skin. However, a consultation with your dermatologist before use is your safest bet, especially if you have dry, sensitive skin or are prone to allergic reactions. Dr. Harper adds, "With prescription-strength retinoids and OTC retinol, avoid use during pregnancy." Studies have shown that both forms can be harmful to unborn children in high doses, but it's much better to be safe than sorry.



HYDROQUINONE

The Pros: If you've got spots, you may have tried hydroquinone, the gold-standard skin bleach. "In prescription-strength doses of 4 to 10 percent, it's the most effective topical ingredient for fading brown patches and spots, particularly when combined with tretinoin," says Wu. Products with a 2 percent or lower concentration of hydroquinone can be purchased without a prescription. Since pigment originates deep in the skin, fading it can be slow going. But hydroquinone, which blocks the production of pigment by inhibiting an enzyme called tyrosinase, is potent and works faster than natural tyrosinase-inhibiting lighteners like kojic acid and arbutin. Prescription-strength doses are meant for short-term use and must be monitored. "I instruct my patients to use it a few times a week and see me in the office regularly," says Wu.

The Cons: Hydroquinone requires monitoring because it can be highly irritating if used incorrectly, causing redness, flaking and breakouts, warns Manhattan dermatologist Paul Jarrod Frank, author of *Turning Back the Clock Without Losing Time*. This irritation can actually increase pigmentation. The disorder, called ochronosis, is extremely rare, however. It occurs in less than 1 percent of users, generally those with very dark skin. Instead of hydroquinone, Dr. Frank recommends a new doctor-sold product called Elure, which breaks down existing pigment with a natural mushroom-derived enzyme. "It works 90 percent as well as hydroquinone, but doesn't irritate and can be used indefinitely."

The Bottom Line: If you're looking to lighten dark spots or hyperpigmentation—especially from acne- or injury-related scarring, then dermatologist-supervised hydroquinone treatment may be extremely effective. But be on the lookout for side effects such as ochronosis, increased sensitivity to light, irritation or allergic reactions.