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## Is Your Antiaging Routine Making Your Skin Look Worse? It's Not All In Your Head

Skin-care enthusiasts lament lousy experiences with 'holy grail' ingredients like hyaluronic acid. The problem? They're using them incorrectly. Here, expert tips.

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"Niacinamide is the devil," said one commenter on the popular Reddit thread 30 Plus Skincare. "My skin hates hyaluronic acid," lamented another.

Across the internet, people are venting about some of the beauty world's most popular and trusted skin-care ingredients. To hear them tell it, these so-called skin saviors are anything but. What's going on?

It's possible, even likely, say dermatologists, that folks who encounter problems are using the products incorrectly. Result: Ingredients meant to make you look more youthful are instead leaving skin parched, wrinkly and irritated.

Often the problem stems not from a single product but a patient's expensive and unnecessary 15-step protocol, says Dr. Sherrif Ibrahim, a dermatologist in Rochester, N.Y. "More is not more."

If you think your antiaging cream is making your skin look worse, not better, you might be right. Read on for how to properly use, apply and layer your workhorse lotions and potions—and what not to do.

### **I know hyaluronic acid is supposed to make my skin look plumper, but I swear my wrinkles are more pronounced. What gives?**

The hyaluronic acid (HA) molecule, called a humectant, binds to water to give skin a plump look and camouflage fine lines. Like a moisture-seeking missile, it will pull water from the closest source.

If you apply it on your face in a dry environment, HA can make your skin look more wrinkled by sucking moisture out of your dermis and epidermis, says Ibrahim. Make sure your skin is damp before applying HA, especially if you live in a dry climate. Never slather it before getting on an airplane, where there is little moisture in the air, or on dehydrated, barrier-compromised skin. To amp up the effects, use a rich moisturizer over your HA to seal in hydration.

**I saw a scary blog post that said if you stop hyaluronic acid, it can make you look like Rip Van Winkle?**

If you've been layering HA for years, an abrupt stop can indeed cause skin to look drier and more wrinkly, but only because your skin has returned to its baseline state, says Dr. Roberta Del Campo, a dermatologist in North Miami. "There's no evidence to suggest that regular use of topical HA causes your body to stop producing it naturally," added Del Campo. If you don't want to commit to regular HA use, alternatives like glycerin, panthenol or polyglutamic acid can "hydrate without causing rebound dryness," said Dr. Aleksandra Brown, a dermatologist in Blacksburg, Va.

**So many products contain niacinamide these days. Is it possible to go overboard?**

Used properly, niacinamide, a form of vitamin B3 that helps support skin barrier function, can brighten skin and regulate oil production, says Jessica Gilbert, a chemist and skin care development specialist in New York.

The caveat? Be wary of products with a high concentration of niacinamide, which can convert to a different form of the vitamin and cause flushing and burning, says Gilbert. A brightening serum with 10% niacinamide left one of New York dermatologist Dr. Rachel Westbay's patients with red, stinging skin. (Once the patient transitioned to a 2% formulation, her skin returned to normal.) "Niacinamide is well-tolerated at lower strengths, but can be sensitizing above 5%, especially when combined with acids or retinoids," said Westbay.

**What are some mistakes when it comes to layering these everyday products?**

"The biggest mistake is layering too many active ingredients at once," said Gilbert. For example, vitamin C paired with exfoliating acids can potentially lead to redness or sensitivity. Trendy multistep regimens do more harm than good for your skin barrier, says Ibrahim. Introduce one active ingredient at a time and stick to a simple routine, urges Dr. Ariel Ostad, a dermatologist and cosmetic facial surgeon in Manhattan: "Consistency, not complexity, delivers real results."



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**I'm not sure that I'm using vitamin C correctly. What should I look for and can it be harmful?**

Vitamin C is a hero antioxidant. It can protect against UV damage and boost collagen production.

The risk? Some forms of vitamin C, such as L-ascorbic acid, are highly unstable and can oxidize when exposed to air and light. And oxidized vitamin C can actually worsen hyperpigmentation, says Westbay. So, says Ostad, look for products packaged in dark bottles or airless pumps, or choose an alternate form, like vitamin C esters, which sensitive skin can tolerate better.

**I have sensitive skin and prefer using all-natural products. Are they safer?**

Not necessarily. "When a patient comes in with a reaction, it's more often than not something like mango butter or other plant-derived compounds in a formula that they're having a reaction to," said Ibrahim, as opposed to so-called active ingredients. Del Campo points to trendy essential oils, "especially citrus, cinnamon and clove" as troublemakers that can strip and disrupt the skin barrier.

Her advice? Patch-test essential oils on your inner wrist before applying to your face, avoid using them near the eyes and mouth, where skin tends to be most sensitive, and always dilute them with a carrier oil like jojoba.