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Retinol: skincare benefits, side effects and more

Whatever your age if you've ever thought about skincare, you've probably heard of retinol. But if you're unsure exactly what it is – or why you might need to know – you're not alone. To muddy the water, the term 'retinol' is used in similar contexts as 'retinoid' and 'retinoic acid' among others. Here's an overview of retinol, its benefits for the skin and things to think about before adding it to your skincare routine.

What is retinol?

In simple terms, retinol is a form of vitamin A. It belongs to a group of chemicals called retinoids, which are all related to and have similar effects on the body to vitamin A.

We need vitamin A, just like we do other nutrients, for several reasons. It contributes to good eyesight, a strong immune system and healthy skin.

Because the body doesn't make vitamin A, we need to get it from somewhere. In the diet, it's found in foods like liver, milk, and eggs, but it's also popular as an oral supplement as well a component of topical creams and serums.

Is retinol good for skin?

Vitamin A and its by-products have been hailed as hero ingredients in skincare for many years, as Dr Catherine Borysiewicz, consultant dermatologist at the [Cadogan Clinic](#) explains.

"Retinol was first used in skincare products in the 1980s, but its use in helping as an anti-ageing ingredient was first reported in medical literature in 1995," she says.

"Nowadays, retinol and retinoids are often recommended by dermatologists to address a number of common skin conditions, including acne, excessive oil production and ageing of the skin."

As it's a weaker form of vitamin A, retinol is available in over-the-counter creams and serums aimed at targeting dark spots and the signs of ageing, but it's unlikely to be effective for treating acne scars.

"[Retinoid products](#) used in the management of severe nodulocystic acne have a deeper penetration than over-the-counter prescription retinols," Dr Borysiewicz adds.

What does retinol do?

Retinol has several benefits for different skin types. It has antioxidant properties, meaning it helps to neutralise molecules called free radicals, which are produced when the skin is exposed to harmful environmental factors, like pollution and ultraviolet [radiation from the sun](#).

Free radicals damage the skin by breaking down [collagen](#), a protein that gives skin its elasticity and plumpness. When collagen is damaged, it manifests in [fine lines, wrinkles](#), and loose, saggy skin.

"Applying a retinol-containing product to the skin prompts thickening of the epidermal skin layer (the outermost layer of your skin), and stimulates collagen production," explains Dr Borysiewicz. As a result, the skin has a firmer structure, and lines and wrinkles appear reduced.

Retinol also increases skin cell turnover, removing old, dead skin cells and replacing them with new, healthy cells.

How to use retinol

As an added 'active' ingredient in skincare products like creams and serums, retinol is available in different strengths. The higher the concentration, the more potent its effects.

It can be tempting to go all out and start off with a high-strength product in hope of turning back the clock. But it can cause irritation, redness, and dryness, so if you're incorporating retinol into your skincare regime, it's best to start low – the lowest-available concentration is 0.3% retinol – and build up the skin's tolerance.

"A personal tip is to gradually increase the time the retinol is on your skin to limit irritation, which I call 'short contact' treatment," says Dr Borysiewicz.

She recommends for the first two weeks applying the retinol to cleansed skin and leaving it for an hour or two, before rinsing with water and using a moisturiser. "After two weeks of this approach, the skin gradually gets used to the retinol. This reduces the risk of irritation."

Another way of allowing the skin to adjust is to apply a retinol cream or serum a few times a week, then increase to every other day and build up to everyday use. If severe irritation or dryness occurs, Dr Borysiewicz adds, it's important to stop using the product immediately.

When to use retinol serum

Retinol can initially make the skin more sensitive to the sun's harmful UV radiation, and in turn, sunlight renders retinol inactive. For those reasons, it should be used at night – with broad-spectrum, [high SPF sunscreen](#) an essential part of your skincare routine every morning.

Is retinol safe?

Having been the subject of a lot of hype, retinol is seen by many as the silver bullet of skincare. But is it too good to be true and, crucially, is it safe for long-term use?

Like most medical and beauty treatments, retinol isn't without side effects and as the concentration and dose of retinol increases, so does the likelihood of side effects, including retinoid dermatitis, says Dr Borysiewicz.

"This typically presents with redness and multiple small bumps in the skin, creating a rough and uneven texture – similar in texture and appearance to sandpaper," she explains. "Sensitive sites such as around the mouth and eyes can be more at risk of these reactions. The rash can be sore, dry, and peeling."

As well as the symptoms associated with retinoid dermatitis, retinol can cause general redness, inflammation, and itching. But more severe reactions – like retinoid purge, where spots are brought to the skin's surface and worsen in the initial stages of acne treatment – are usually only seen with prescription-strength retinoids.

Overall, however, retinol has been [demonstrated to be safe](#) as well as [effective](#) in some studies.

Can I use retinol while pregnant?

Pregnant, and breastfeeding people should not use retinol and if you have particularly sensitive skin, it's best to speak to a dermatologist first.

Can you use other skincare ingredients with retinol?

You can mitigate the risk of unwanted symptoms and boost retinol's beneficial effects by choosing other skincare products that complement rather than clash with retinol. "Look at your skincare products – your cleansers and moisturisers – and make sure they are gentle and hydrating," Dr Borysiewicz advises.

Can you use vitamin C with retinol?

If you also use topical vitamin C in your skincare routine, it's best not to mix it with a retinol product since they tend to have different pH levels. Applying them at the same time therefore makes both less effective. A solution is to use vitamin C in the morning and retinol at night.

Can you use hyaluronic acid with retinol?

Retinol can be used safely and effectively alongside some other popular active skincare ingredients, including hyaluronic acid and niacinamide, but some other combinations require caution.

Can you use retinol with AHAs?

"If you are starting a retinol, it might not mix well with other active ingredients like alpha hydroxy acid ([AHA](#)) and beta hydroxy acid (BHA)," Dr Borysiewicz says. AHAs and BHAs are exfoliants, so there's a chance they could increase retinol-induced irritation on sensitive skins.

The take-home message is that retinol is a popular addition to any anti-ageing protocol, and it can be incorporated into most skincare regimes without problems. If you are in any doubt or have specific concerns that you're unsure how to treat, ask a dermatologist for advice.

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