

SKIN DEEP

Exfoliation Tips for the Best Skin Ever

What products should you rely on? We turned to two experts to get the answers.

By CRYSTAL MARTIN

Done correctly, exfoliation helps your skin purge dead cells, revealing a better complexion underneath. That magic draws us to the practice but also makes us overzealous. At home, aggressive exfoliation can cause skin damage, irritation and breakouts.

So what kinds of products do the job best? We turned to dermatologists and an aesthetician for answers.

Your cells shed on their own, but they do need help.

Exfoliation happens primarily in the outer layer of your skin, the stratum corneum. The dead skin cells there should shed in a process called desquamation, but it is slowed by a number of factors: hormone fluctuations, sun exposure, vitamin deficiencies and aging. That leaves most of us in need of some intervention. Exfoliation, either mechanical or chemical, accelerates the shedding process, and when done right, reveals healthy skin cells.

Don't exfoliate severely inflamed skin.

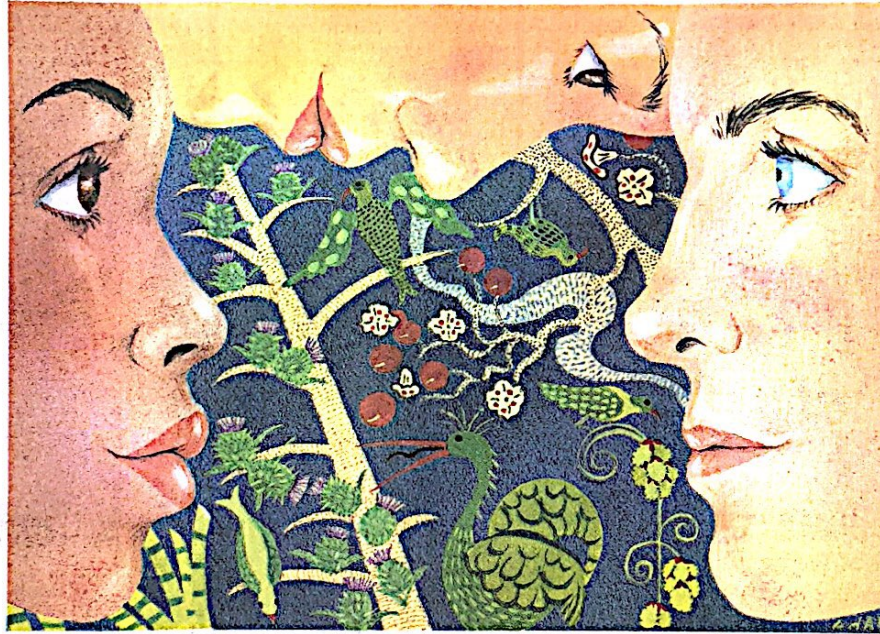
Some skin conditions are worsened by exfoliation. Arash Akhavan, the founder of the Dermatology & Laser Group in New York, tells patients who have inflamed cases of acne or rosacea to skip exfoliation. "Exfoliation inherently causes some level of trauma to the skin, leading to a small amount of inflammation," Dr. Akhavan said. That irritation would overwhelm skin that is already inflamed from acne or rosacea.

Chemical peels are best, usually.

There are two main types of exfoliation: chemical and mechanical. Chemical exfoliations use fruit enzymes or acids like glycolic acid, derived from sugar, and lactic acid, which is made from milk. Mechanical exfoliations use beads, brushes and razors (dermaplaning) to lift dead cells off the skin.

"A scrub or tool like a brush involves your own manual pressure, and people tend to be very aggressive with them," said Sejal Shah, the founder of SmarterSkin Dermatology in New York. "Scrubs made from fruit pits and nut shells create small tears in the skin." Those small injuries are not the same as the tiny wounds created during a microneedling procedure.

"With a cosmetic procedure, the injury is controlled and typically microscopic," Dr. Shah said. Not so with tears caused by



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harsh exfoliation. "I think most dermatologists tend to like chemical exfoliants because they are overall more effective while being gentler on the skin," she said. Chemical exfoliants gently break the bonds that hold dead skin cells together, so they can be easily rinsed away.

But for skin with a history of irritation or allergy from cleansers and lotions, mechanical is the way to go. "With a brush, there are no ingredients for the skin to react to," Dr. Akhavan said.

Most Clarisonic-style brush users press too hard. The bristles should lightly graze the skin to get the benefit of their back-and-forth, pore-cleaning motion, said Jeannel Astarita, an aesthetician and the owner of Just Ageless, a noninvasive skin care and body contouring studio in New York.

"I tell everyone, 'Do not bend the bristles.'"

If you're new to exfoliation, start with enzymes.

Ms. Astarita prefers fruit enzymes like the papaya in DefenAge 2-Minute Reveal Masque (\$74) because they're gentler and better tolerated than acids. For scrub loyalists, a product like Juara Radiance Enzyme Scrub (\$38) combines apple enzymes and a fine, smooth polish. Know that the enzymes do most of the exfoliating work — no rubbing allowed.

For a stronger peel, graduate to acids.

Alpha hydroxy acids — typically glycolic, lactic and citric — are stronger exfoliants than enzymes. Try them after a few weeks of enzyme exfoliation with no irritation. "Lactic acid is great for oily, sensitive skin and has good outcomes treating oiliness in African-American skin," said the dermatol-

ogist Macrene Alexiades. Her practice, in New York, focuses on noninvasive treatments for natural anti-aging results.

"Citric acid is a relatively weak alpha hydroxy acid," Dr. Alexiades said. "It does not peel the skin unless used at higher concentrations or long exposure times."

Glycolic acid, though, is the star AHA. It's the smallest molecule of the acids, so it penetrates deepest to treat fine lines, dullness and superficial hyperpigmentation, and it is a humectant. Think of it as a skin care generalist, an assist for achieving the most beloved of skin goals: glow. AHAs that are stand-alone exfoliators are most effective. Exfoliating cleansers, for example, aren't on the skin long enough to work.

But how strong is your peel?

While you're shopping, keep in mind that peel products are only as effective as their ingredient concentration and pH allow them to be. A measure called free acid value indicates the real amount of acid your skin will be able to use but is almost never disclosed. There are some exceptions.

The Glytone Rejuvenating Mini Peel Gel (\$64) is a straightforward glycolic exfoliator that lists its free acid value of 10.8 right on the bottle. That's in the moderate strength range, so you'll see better texture and more even tone over time (but could also see slight irritation).

The Drunk Elephant T.L.C. Sukari Babyfacial (\$80) combines all the AHAs at a peel-friendly acidic 3.5 pH. It also features salicylic acid, a beta hydroxy acid. "BHAs are oil soluble, which allows them to work deeper, inside the pores," Dr. Shah said. "It's a good treatment for acne-prone skin."

When paired with AHAs in relatively small amounts, as in this product, salicylic acid makes delivery of all the active ingredients more efficient.

For most products, unfortunately, you'll have to judge strength by feel. "If you put it on and it itches, it's relatively mild," Dr. Alexiades said. "If it stings or burns, it's stronger."

It's tempting, but don't overdo it.

Overly exfoliated skin atrophies, according to Dr. Alexiades. "That skin looks like parchment paper," she said. "You feel like you could pop it with a pin." If you're using strong at-home acid peels, once a week is likely enough.

Since AHAs can increase sun sensitivity, do not exfoliate right before exposure to lots of sun, like a beach vacation. But you should still exfoliate during the summer months (sun exposure decreases cell turnover). Just be vigilant about sunscreen, reapplying frequently.