

SKIN IN BALANCE

Going back to the basics by understanding the pH of skin

by Joanna Kula, L.E.



One of the most important topics that estheticians learn early in their course of study is how pH relates to the skin. But what makes pH so important? Why is it necessary, and what can we as professionals do to help restore balance to the skin? Let's dive a little deeper into the science and learn more about why pH is such a crucial component of skin health.

POTENTIAL OF HYDROGEN

In chemistry, the term pH refers to the "potential of hydrogen" and measures the acidity and alkalinity of a solution based on the number of hydrogen ions present. The pH scale is logarithmic and ranges between 1 and 14. Each value represents a change of 10 times the previous value and is based around a neutral midpoint of 7, which is neither acidic nor alkaline.

An acidic solution will have levels of hydrogen ions greater than the amount found in pure water. A basic solution, in contrast, will have a hydrogen ion concentration lower than that of water.

THE ACID MANTLE

We can't really talk about the pH of skin without mentioning the "acid mantle." Often referred to as the skin's "protective barrier" and comprised of mainly of sweat, sebum, lipids, and amino acids, the acid mantle is the protective layer that covers the surface of the stratum corneum and gives the skin a slightly acidic property that falls somewhere between 4.7 and 5.5 on the pH scale.

This acidic environment not only keeps bacteria, viruses, and other pathogens from entering the skin, but it also supports the skin's microbiome and plays a key role in proper barrier function, hydration, and sebum production.

WHY IS PH SO IMPORTANT?

Maintaining proper pH balance of the skin is essential to keeping it healthy and strengthening its natural defense against the environment, pollution, bacteria, and other aggressors. When

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the pH is routinely disrupted in either direction, the skin can become more vulnerable to dryness, dehydration, redness, inflammation, eczema, hyperpigmentation, and acne.

RESTORE BALANCE & REPAIR THE SKIN BARRIER

The first step towards restoring balance in the skin is to identify and address the underlying causes. The telltale signs of unbalanced skin are dry, flaky patches, inflammation, and redness.

Using harsh products with either too high or too low pH daily can severely damage the barrier and leave the skin vulnerable. Alkaline cleaners, chemical peels, prescription topicals, active ingredients, stress, aging, poor lifestyle habits, and exposure to extreme elements such as heat, wind, and cold can all negatively impact the skin's pH.

Because the skin is naturally acidic, it favors anything around the same pH level or just slightly lower. Gentle AHAs and PHAs, such as lactic acid, mandelic acid and gluconolactone, and prebiotic and probiotic ingredients can stimulate the skin to produce more of its own moisturizing factors and lipids, as well as keep the microbiome flourishing.

A BACK TO BASICS APPROACH

When the skin's pH is disrupted, and skin is left exposed, ingredients that are bioidentical to its barrier composition can help soothe, nourish and repair it. These can include a combination of natural waxes, lipids, fatty acids, cholesterol, ceramides, amino acids, and minerals.

In the treatment room, combining gentle cleansing/exfoliation with facial massage, a nourishing mask, and oxygen or LED light therapy can be an effective remedy to help restore the pH, reduce inflammation, and promote healing.

For home care, clients should avoid over-cleansing or over-exfoliating the skin and use only pH-balanced products that have been recommended by a professional. A gentle cleanser and a restorative serum, cream or mask can be used daily until the skin improves. Once pH balance is restored, the skin should start to look calmer, healthier, and more hydrated. Active ingredients can then be reintroduced slowly and gradually.

Our largest organ is remarkably efficient and capable of protecting itself from the constant onslaught of harsh elements and will usually normalize itself within a few days to a week. But, when the health of the skin hangs in the balance, we must do our best to avoid damaging it in the first place. ■



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