

What are chemical peels?

Chemical peels are a way of deeply exfoliating the skin. They typically contain acids of varying strengths and types which remove the sun damaged, thicker, outer layers of dead skin.

There are three broad types of chemical peel:

- Superficial peels which remove part of the outer, epidermal layer of skin
- Medium-depth peels which remove the whole epidermal layer and can reach the upper dermal layers
- Deep peels which remove the epidermal, upper dermal and can reach the deep dermal layers of skin.

The depth of the peel depends on the strength and type of acid used.

Chemical peels can be used to reduce the appearance of fine lines, age spots, sun damage and acne scarring, resulting in smoother, more even skin. They do this in part by removing superficial damaged skin, but also by stimulating collagen production in the deeper layers.

How do chemical peels work?

During a superficial chemical peel, acids are used to create an intentional, controlled injury to a specific skin depth. The acid breaks the chemical bonds which hold the skin cells together, causing them to peel off. The aim is to deeply exfoliate the skin, which in turn, stimulates new skin cell growth and collagen production, with more evenly distributed melanin. The new skin that grows has improved surface texture and appearance. Acids commonly used for superficial peels include (but are not limited to): lactic acid, glycolic acid, tartaric acid and salicylic acid.

Medium-depth peels are usually carried out using trichloroacetic acid (TCA) at concentrations between 35% and 50%. Other acids are sometimes used, including: phenol, glycolic, pyruvic and salicylic acid, as well as Jessner's solution, which is a combination of acids.

Often, a course of peels is required to achieve optimal results.

Who are chemical peels good for?

Chemical peels are effective on all skin types and tones. They are used to improve the appearance of uneven skin, fine lines, acne scarring and sun damaged skin. Chemical peels can be used the face, neck and most places of the body, but are most commonly used on the face and backs of hands. It's important to note that the skin on different areas of the body will react differently to the same peel, so a practitioner may advise different peels for different areas.

Who are chemical peels NOT suitable for?

Chemical peels are not suitable for those who are wanting to reduce pore size or improve saggy, loose skin.

You may not be suitable for a chemical peel if you:

- have a history of problems with skin scarring, particularly keloid scarring
- have certain skin pigment issues, or are taking medications that can make the skin photosensitive
- have skin cancer in the area to be treated
- have warts or an active skin infection in the area to be treated
- have used prescription acne treatments such as isotretinoin
- have had any other abrasive treatment, including home care treatment
- have shaved or recently exfoliated or waxed the area
- if you have darkly pigmented skin may be unsuitable for deeper peels due to the heightened risk of hyperpigmentation
- extra caution may be required if you have dry skin or conditions like dermatitis and rosacea – your practitioner will advise
- have been taken isotretinoin in the last 12 months



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Your practitioner will discuss which treatment options are best for you, providing you with alternatives, where necessary, including the option for no treatment.

How do you prepare for a chemical peel?

- 4-6 weeks prior to your treatment, stop using skin products containing vitamin A derivatives, unless directed by your practitioner.
- 1-2 weeks prior to your treatment, avoid exfoliating facials, waxing, hair removal creams, laser hair removal, electrolysis and sunbathing/sunbed use.
- 24 hours prior to your treatment, stop using exfoliating products including those containing alpha and beta hydroxy acids.

What happens during a chemical peel?

Your face is first cleansed thoroughly. It may be degreased with alcohol to maximise the absorption of acid into your skin.

The peel is applied to the skin with a soft brush or cotton pads and left on for a few minutes, depending on the acid used and how well you tolerate the stinging sensation.

Some peel solutions react with the skin causing it to become 'frosted', where it slowly turns pinkish-white over several minutes.

The skin may be cooled with fans during this time.

The peel is then washed off, or neutralised.

Your skin will then be moisturised and protected with a high SPF sunscreen.

Sometimes, practitioners carry out a superficial peel prior to a medium depth peel, to increase the efficacy of the medium depth peel.

Your practitioner should explain your specific treatment to you during the consultation.

What should you do following a chemical peel?

It is very important that you carefully follow the advice of your practitioner following a peel treatment to help improve the benefit of the procedure and reduce the risk of complications or side effects.

Following your chemical peel treatment, you should cleanse your face very gently with a soap-free cleanser, patting the skin dry with a towel. Ensure you moisturise your skin well.

2-4 days after your treatment you may experience peeling – though not everyone does. DO NOT pick or peel your skin. If you do, you risk bleeding, discolouration and even scarring.

Wear a high SPF sunscreen for at least 6 weeks post-treatment. This will reduce the risk of brown blotches (hyperpigmentation) forming on your skin.

For medium-depth peels, only use the skincare products advised by your practitioner following your treatment.

Avoid strenuous activity for 24 hours after your treatment, and avoid saunas, steam rooms and hot showers until your skin is healed.

Do not have any other facial treatments for at least 1 week after the peel.

Avoid electrolysis, depilatory creams, waxing and laser hair removal for at least 7 days after treatment, or until your skin has fully recovered.

Avoid strong chlorinated water for around 14 days. If, at any point, you experience any unexpected pain or swelling, discolouration, hyperpigmentation, hypopigmentation or infection, consult your practitioner immediately. Please note that prior to the skin peeling away, it may become uniformly darker.

What are the side effects and risks of chemical peels?

Superficial chemical peels are the gentlest of the peels, you are less likely to experience an adverse reaction.

- You may experience slight white discolouration in some areas or blotchy skin, though this should subside within a few hours.
- You may experience peeling 2-7 days after your treatment. During this time, your skin may feel tight, dry and uncomfortable. You may also experience tenderness, tingling, itching or stinging.
- You may experience a mild acne outbreak after your treatment.



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- There is a small risk of hyperpigmentation (brown spots on the skin) may occur with all peels, especially if your skin is darker. To reduce the chance of this, it is important to use creams as directed by your practitioner. This should include a high factor sunscreen daily.
- It is important to avoid direct sun exposure for 6 weeks post-peel.
- Cold sores – if you are susceptible to cold sores, you may find you have an outbreak after a chemical peel. To help prevent this, taking a course of antiviral medicine as advised by your practitioner beforehand may be advised.
- Redness – sometimes skin redness persists for more than 2-3 months, but this usually disappears in time.

Medium-depth peels are more aggressive.

- Your face may swell slightly following a medium-depth peel and your skin may turn dark brown with white streaks. Following this, the skin will peel over 5-7 days, during which time it may be itchy, tight and easily irritated.
- Once the skin has peeled, fresh, bright red skin will appear. This will fade to your normal skin tone over 3-6 weeks. Sometimes, skin redness persists for more than 2-3 months, but this also usually disappears in time.
- Hyperpigmentation (brown spots on skin) may occur with all peels. To reduce the chance of this, apply high factor sunscreen daily and avoid direct sun exposure for 6 weeks post peel.
- If you are susceptible to cold sores, you may find you have an outbreak after a chemical peel. To help prevent this, taking a course of antiviral medicine beforehand may be advised by your practitioner.
- There is a small chance of developing a localised skin infection following a chemical peel.
- Scarring is extremely unlikely with a medium-depth peel if done properly, by a medically qualified practitioner, who will advise appropriate before and aftercare ensuring the risk of infection is minimised.

What are alternatives to chemical peel treatments?

There are many alternatives to chemical peel treatments, depending on your particular aesthetic concerns and reasons for seeking treatment.

Alternatives include, but are not limited to, medical grade skincare, microneedling, device-based skin tightening (e.g. HIFU, RF, IPL), laser resurfacing, cosmetic surgery or no treatment.

Your practitioner will be able to discuss alternative treatments with you during your consultation.

