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THE NEW SKIN-CARE SECRET

The latest buzz isn't about a new power tool or ingredient but rather the combination of time-tested technologies with tried-and-true topicals. When used together, they're the antiaging weapon du jour. By Jessica Prince

AS IT TURNS OUT, making microscopic holes in your face may be the way to get a youthful complexion. If this sounds crazy, allow us to explain. If you've ever experienced an antiaging laser (like Fraxel) or a micro-needling treatment (like Dermalpen), you've actually already put hundreds, if not thousands, of holes in your skin. So here's the question that has doctors debating: Will topical products penetrate better (when applied during and right after these procedures) courtesy of these tiny pathways? "These channels allow a momentary increase in permeability that is hundreds of times the normal degree that topical products can penetrate the skin," says Jon Turk, a New York plastic surgeon. "Depending on the desired target—pigment, thin skin, wrinkles—the appropriate topical serum effect can be accelerated dramatically."

There's another big bonus too: shorter recovery time following cosmetic procedures. When the right product is applied post-treatment, "it's actually helping the skin to heal faster," says Elizabeth Hale, a New York dermatologist who now treats her patients with stem cell extracts in Lifeline Skin Care products after the Fraxel Re:store Dual laser to help cut recovery time.

While doctors like Turk and Hale are excited about combining the two, other experts like cosmetic chemist Jim Hammer voice safety concerns. "Emulsifiers, fragrances, and preservatives may become a source of irritation if the product is not applied as intended," he says. Although there are solid arguments supporting both sides, everyone agrees that certain ingredients are safe. (One thing is for sure: Avoid retinol, glycolic, and alpha-hydroxy acids.) And before you try any of these suggested treatment duos, always consult your dermatologist.

STARTERS: NEEDLING

For women in their 20s, 30s, or 40s experiencing fine lines or a dull complexion, "micro-needling is a good place to start," says Chia Chi Kao, a Santa Monica plastic surgeon. These treatments use fine stainless steel

needles to puncture the skin at varying depths, creating a controlled injury that's safe on all skin types (including dark and/or acne-prone complexions) with little downtime. "Micro-needling is the least invasive method for increasing skin permeability, but it also has the most conservative effect on the skin," explains Turk. The most common methods are either manual rollers or electronic pens that contain anywhere from a dozen to more than a hundred needles, but what's important is the depth at which they penetrate the skin.

THE MANUAL-ROLLER FACIAL To achieve a radiance boost without recovery time, consider the gentlest (and, oldest) form of micro-needling: the handheld derma roller, a tool that's been popping up in spa services across the country. The Caudalie Vinotherapie Spa, at the Plaza hotel in New York, is the latest to offer a facial with derma rolling. The Premier Cru Facial (\$350; 80 minutes) "improves the permeability of the skin, helps the penetration of active ingredients to sink in deeper, and boosts the collagen and elastin fibers thanks to the natural healing process of the micro-needling," says Regine Berthelot, the spa's head aesthetician. Premier Cru the Elixir (packed with resveratrol, polyphenols, and jojoba oil) is applied and massaged in with the roller using upward strokes. According to our tester, "it was painless but felt tingly, especially around the hairline and chin, like long nails scratching my face." Immediately following treatment, skin is flushed and firm.

THE ELECTRONIC-PEN TREATMENT For one notch up in intensity, there's the newly launched micro-needling service at Kate Somerville's Skin Health Experts clinic in L.A. (\$400). It combines the power of the MD Pen—an electronic pen-shaped device (similar to the Dermalpen) equipped with 12 needles that puncture holes as it glides over the face—with one of three serums to either tighten (caviar extract), brighten (niacinamide), or hydrate (hyaluronic acid) the skin. The combination ▶



OUR PICKS
 1. Pacific Balancing Face Oil, \$110. 2. Clark's Botanicals Age-Defying Radiance Cream, \$119. 3. Nude Skincare ProGenius Omega Treatment Milk, \$78. 4. Retrouvé Intensive Replenishing Facial Moisturizer, \$520.

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"maximizes topical penetration and increases growth factors and natural collagen," claims clinic codirector Melissa Haloosim. The needle placements can range from 0.5 millimeters to 2.75 millimeters depending on the goal of the treatment, which is safe on all skin types. "The results range from the reduction of fine lines and pores to the improvement of acne scarring and skin texture," adds Haloosim. The one-hour treatment requires topical numbing, so it's technically pain-free "but not relaxing," she cautions. A series of four to six sessions is recommended, and tightening is noticeable after one treatment. Redness fades within a day.

THE CUSTOMIZED-CELL INFUSION One of the most revolutionary micro-needling techniques incorporates a serum that features your own cells. Kao offers a Pure Plasma Cell Infusion treatment (\$4,800), which marries a micro-needling pen and a bespoke antiaging cocktail. "It's what you add on top that makes it special," he says. To create the serum, a patient's blood is drawn (about two ounces) and spun to separate out platelets and protein, which are then applied to the skin in a concentrated form. (The blood is discarded prior to application.) "Platelets have a lot of growth factors, and the skin drinks them up," says Kao, who recommends doing the treatment three times a year for long-term improvements in texture. Instant results: Skin appears radiant and plumped, albeit red for a day or two.

THE BIG GUNS: LASERS

If your objective is to reverse deep wrinkles and serious sun damage, consider a stronger antiaging weapon with heat energy like a laser. Although micro-needling treatments can create deep holes, "without the heat that comes from a laser or a radio-frequency energy, a deeper channel doesn't necessarily give you a better result," explains Turk. "Heat remodels collagen, causing change."

THE GLOW BOOSTER For patients wishing to diminish early signs of aging, doctors swear by the Clear + Brilliant Permea, a low-power, nonablative laser that's pain-free (think slight warmth and tingling sans anesthetic) and warrants little downtime (pink skin fades within a day). Hale suggests that patients slather on SkinMedica Lytera Skin Brightening Complex (\$125), which contains five skin brighteners, right after the treatment. "We apply it immediately after and then have patients continue it at home because you're actually getting better penetration for two to three days," she says. Also look for ingredients like licorice, vitamin C, niacinamide, and resorcinol. We like La Prairie's serum and Clark's Botanicals moisturizer.



OUR PICKS
 1. Environ Gold Roll-CIT, \$300. 2. La Prairie Anti-Aging Rapid Response Booster, \$290. 3. Fresh Seaberry Skin Nutrition Booster, \$45. 4. Estée Lauder Nutritious Radiant Vitality Essence Oil, \$68.

THE WRINKLE ERASER To combat deeper lines, sun damage, or scarring, Philadelphia dermatologist laser surgeon Eric Bernstein reaches for the Fraxel Dual, a laser that requires a topical anesthetic and a couple of days of downtime. Redness, dryness, and flaking are the most common side effects. "Topicals will get you 50 percent of the way there, and lasers will get you 50 percent of the way there, and together they get you all the way there," he says. He recommends layering on, post-procedure, antioxidants like glutathione, found in his LaseResults Calm & Restore Serum (\$155). We also like Fresh's skin-boosting oil and Nude's treatment milk. "I won't treat someone with a laser if they're not going to use topicals afterward because they're not achieving the maximum benefits," Bernstein says. Note: If your skin could benefit from something stronger than traditional micro-needling, but you're not ready for a laser, ask your doctor about the Fractora skin-resurfacing treatment using radio-frequency technology. "It falls in between the other options, yielding better clinical results than micro-needling but with considerably less downtime than laser resurfacing," says Turk.

AT-HOME OPTIONS

To take the war on aging into your own hands—literally—here's what you need in your arsenal: For a DIY laser, try the Tria Age Defying Laser (\$495), a milder version of the same nonablative fractional technology in the doctor's office. "It really works," says Bernstein. In a study, he found that absorption of active ingredients was up to four times greater. Use it five nights a week for 12 weeks, and follow each session with the brand's vitamin C-infused Super C Brightening Moisturizer (\$60). Or try Retrouvé's tool online. "You have to be careful," says Katie Rodan, a California dermatologist and a cofounder of Rodan + Fields. "Reactions can be unpredictable." We like Environ's and Rodan + Fields AMP MD Micro-Exfoliating Roller (\$200 including products). Both use stainless steel needles that penetrate the skin 0.2 millimeters, "so it isn't designed to go into the epidermis, but it conditions the outer layer to allow for a more even uptake of products," says Rodan. As for which products are safe to use, opinions are split. While Rodan recommends using only formulas that have been pretested (like the brand's Night Renewing Serum, proven to work with the AMP MD tool), others like Hale say it's fine to use your favorites. We're in the camp, though, "if you're using these enhanced treatments, you will not require as much product," says cosmetic chemist Ni'Kita Wilson. A little will go a longer way. Who knew a few holes in your skin could be better for your complexion and your bank account? ■