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Skincare Spotlight



Exfoliation 101

From gentle, at-home exfoliators to in-office chemical treatments, learn the benefits of weekly facial exfoliation.

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Skin exfoliation is a naturally occurring physiological process in which dead surface skin cells organically slough off. This is often referred to as cellular turnover and it involves removing the top layer of dead skin cells. While our skin has a natural cellular turnover system, it is helpful to move this process along—because like most naturally occurring physiological processes, this one slows as we age. Thus, manual exfoliation (whether that's with products or devices) should be incorporated into one's skincare routine, especially once middle age is reached.

The benefits of exfoliation are numerous and include promoting epidermal regeneration; enhancing the softness and smoothness of the skin; helping to give the skin a more uniform texture; brightening the overall complexion; deep-cleansing pores; and helping to minimize breakouts, blackheads and whiteheads. In addition, exfoliation will make all other skincare products work better, as they can more easily penetrate the skin once the dead skin barrier is removed. Finally, over the long-term, regular exfoliation may lead to increased collagen production—resulting in younger-looking skin.

There are two types of exfoliation: mechanical (also known as physical) and chemical (also known as enzymatic). Here, we take an in-depth look at each.

MECHANICAL EXFOLIATION

Mechanical exfoliation is the process of using fine, solid particles to remove dead skin cells by physical abrasion, leaving behind smoother skin. These types of exfoliating scrubs contain small particles of natural or polymeric ingredients and are intended to provide a deep-cleansing experience, including a higher level of skin exfoliation due to abrasion with the particles.

Typically, mechanical exfoliation is known to improve the appearance of aging or discolored skin and enhance the penetration of topical products. Mechanical exfoliation can be performed in a professional setting, such as microdermabrasion, and at home with the use of topical products or at-home devices.

Mechanical exfoliation is not usually recommended on very sensitive, reactive or inflamed skin. It is also typically to be avoided on acne-prone skin experiencing active breakouts. The most common ingredients used for mechanical exfoliation include: nut and walnut shells or powder, apricot and peach seeds or powder, jojoba beads, polyethylene/styrene beads (see sidebar on right) and almond meal. No matter which ingredient is used, it is important that the particles be fine, smooth and without sharp edges, so that no micro-wounds are created in the skin.

Another form of mechanical exfoliation is the use of at-home devices, ranging from at-home microdermabrasion machines to sonic cleansing brushes. These deep-cleansing devices are an easy way for customers to unclog pores, minimize blackheads and facilitate extractions. The key with any at-home device or sonic brush is to ensure its cleanliness—advise your customers to frequently replace their brush heads to avoid the growth of unwanted bacteria.

CHEMICAL EXFOLIATION

Chemical exfoliation happens with the use of substances that cause dead skin cells to desquamate at an increased rate as a result of a disruption in the intercellular bonding within the outer layer of skin called the stratum corneum. This means that the bond between our dead skin cells and our healthy skin breaks down as a result of a chemical reaction.

BEST PRACTICES

When recommending an exfoliation product or device to your customer, it is helpful to remember the following:

- 1 For most skin types, exfoliating once or twice a week is enough.
- 2 Mechanical exfoliators tend to be the best for clogged pores and uneven complexions.
- 3 Chemical exfoliators tend to be the best for inflamed, acne-prone skin.
- 4 Mechanical and chemical products can be combined, but should not be used together (meaning not on the same day).
- 5 It is important to remind your mature clientele that exfoliation is a necessary step in their skincare routine because the cellular turnover system naturally slows down with age.

There are various levels of chemical exfoliation: light, medium and deep. Typically, topical products enable light chemical exfoliation, with limited side effects. Medium and deep exfoliation treatments happen in a professional skincare setting and are typically associated with side effects such as redness, inflammation, flaking and peeling.

Light chemical exfoliation is usually preferred over mechanical exfoliation for more sensitive skin types, as well as for inflamed, acne-prone skin.

THE PROBLEM WITH MICROBEADS

No conversation about exfoliation is complete without discussing microbeads.

In 2015, the U.S. government passed the Microbead-Free Waters Act to ban the production of personal care products and cosmetics containing plastic microbeads. Microbeads are defined as any solid plastic particles less than 5 mm in size, which are intended to exfoliate or cleanse. They are often used in products like toothpastes, facial cleansers and scrubs. The reason for this ban is because microbeads were entering natural waterways and wastewater treatment plants weren't effectively removing such particles. Plus, a United Nations Environment Programme report concluded that most such plastics in cosmetics and personal care products contained nondegradable polymers that may take hundreds of years to break down via oxidative or photodegradation processes. So, while some of your customers may miss microbeads in their exfoliation products, you can recommend other natural alternatives that still do the trick!

An example of superficial chemical exfoliation would be a light chemical peel, such as an enzymatic peel—in which enzymes are used to dissolve the keratin in the skin, thereby removing dead cells and enhancing the natural process of exfoliation. A common enzyme used in chemical exfoliators is papain from the papaya fruit.

In addition to enzymes, other ingredients used for light chemical exfoliation include alpha hydroxy acids (AHAs) such as glycolic, malic or lactic acids. Indeed, the cosmetic benefits attributed to skin exfoliation have been known since the era of ancient Egyptians, who liked to bathe in milk because it led to softer, smoother

skin. Today, it is a well-known fact that milk contains the bioactive ingredient lactic acid. AHAs are useful to treat dry skin, seborrheic dermatitis, callosities, acne, scarring and actinic and seborrheic keratosis.

There are also polyhydroxy acids (PHAs) for light chemical exfoliation, which include gluconolactone and lactobionic acid. In addition to the antiaging and cellular turnover benefits of PHAs, they have humectant properties not provided by AHAs, and thus help the skin attract water and increase skin hydration levels. PHAs are also typically less irritating than AHAs.

Lastly, beta-hydroxy acids (BHA), such as salicylic acid, are gentle exfoliators. This acid works on breakouts, whiteheads and blackheads, and is contraindicated for pregnant and nursing women. It is a favorite for oily, acne-prone skin types.

Whether you recommend that your customer exfoliates on his or her own twice a week or with a professional esthetician every so often, this vital part of a successful skincare regimen shouldn't be overlooked. ■

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