

allure

THE BEAUTY EXPERT



The Biggest Myths



Many women can't shake their popular—but patently false—beliefs about skin. We reveal the truth.

By Cara Litke

Feed a fever, starve a cold—or is it the other way around? The more anti-aging products you pile on, the better—or is it the opposite? Just as myths about curing the common cold proliferate, so does lore about aging skin. "The science is constantly evolving, so it is almost impossible to keep the facts straight," says dermatologist Doris J. Day, clinical assistant professor of dermatology at New York City Medical Center. Making matters more confusing, many women follow the misguided advice of their mothers, friends, and facialists who aren't up to speed. As dermatologist Heidi A. Waldorf, associate clinical professor at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York City, says, "The only way to make positive changes in your skin is to educate yourself about what works and what doesn't."

#1 Cleansers with anti-aging ingredients don't work because you rinse them off right away.

Some anti-aging cleansers—particularly those containing glycolic acid—can actually improve skin tone and texture with just a little bit of contact. Don't rush through your time at the sink, though. "To guarantee absorption, massage your cleanser into your skin for about a minute before rinsing it off," Day says. You could also alternate your regular cleanser with premoistened cleansing wipes. "Many of them contain anti-aging ingredients like alpha hydroxy acids, and they're a great alternative since you don't rinse them off at all," says Jeannette Graf, former assistant clinical professor of dermatology at New York University Medical Center.

#2 Home microdermabrasion is no different than a grainy scrub.

Besides the fact that they're both exfoliants, microdermabrasion and scrubs have little in common. "Grainy scrubs are often made up of coarse, rough particles, which can be too harsh for sensitive skin," Day says. "Microdermabrasion kits are just as—if not more—effective, but they have fine, even particles and are much less aggravating." Plus, the kits often contain soothing, hydrating ingredients.

#3 If using glycolic peels or microdermabrasion kits twice a week is good, then every day is better.

Yes, you can have too much of a good thing. "Using these products too often might make your skin feel smoother temporarily, but it can be very irritating in the long run," Waldorf says. And the more you do it, the harder it will be to restore your skin's health. "These products work only if your skin has time to recover in between. If not, it will lose its protective barrier and become weak and dull," Day says. Even if a kit suggests daily use, "I still tell patients to use them no more than twice weekly—your skin simply doesn't need it," Waldorf says.

#4 Over-the-counter creams can't build collagen in the skin.

Actually, over-the-counter retinol (along with prescription retinoids) is able to increase the collagen in your skin by promoting the regrowth of new cells at the skin's deepest level. And now there's news that some other over-the-counter products have been proven to stimulate collagen, too. "We used to think that peptide particles were too big to penetrate, but now some companies attach them to other molecules, such as lipids and liposomes, that are able to get through," Waldorf says. The same is true for antioxidants. "Scientists have discovered ways to attach them to liposomes, which can easily penetrate the skin," Graf says. The only downside: "It takes much longer to build collagen with an over-the-counter cream than it does with a prescription," Waldorf says.

#5 You need separate products for acne and anti-aging.

It's actually quite possible to hit these two birds with one stone—especially if that stone is a retinoid. "Prescription retinoids such as tretinoin and tazarotene are potent acne medications as well as the gold standard for topical anti-aging," Waldorf says. "They sweep away the dead cells that cause whiteheads, blackheads, and clogged pores, and they increase cell turnover and collagen production." And while retinoids were once thought to fight only the signs of sun damage, "we now know that they can fight genetic aging too," Waldorf says. "This is great news for women who do protect themselves from the sun but still have some lines." As for over-the-counter options, "products containing lower-strength retinol can still be effective against aging and acne-ridden skin," she says.

#6 Expensive means better.

True—in the case of handbags, sheets, and flat-screen televisions. But inexpensive anti-aging products can work well, and they could even be better. "Expensive products may have great packaging and marketing, but they do not necessarily have more science backing them up," Waldorf says. Case in point: "A clinical study in the February 2006 issue of *Dermatologic Surgery* showed that Aveeno's Soy Moisturizer is a more effective anti-aging treatment than StriVectin"—a stretch-mark cream turned wrinkle reducer—says Jeanine Downie, a Montclair, New Jersey, dermatologist. One guideline is to "stick to labels that you know," Waldorf says. "An obscure product might say it contains certain ingredients, but you can't be sure of what you're getting or how effective it will be."

#7 The more anti-agers you layer on, the better.

Smearing on product after product might make you think you're doing the utmost for your skin, but it isn't worth the effort—or the money. "The more treatments you use, the more likely you are to develop an allergy or irritation and have no idea which product caused it," Waldorf says. "Plus, the products won't work as well. A balanced approach is best—focus on a couple products with the ingredients your skin needs most." For the majority of people, that's "a lightweight antioxidant serum followed by an SPF-infused moisturizer in the morning and a retinoid followed by a moisturizer (or a moisturizer with retinol) at night," Waldorf says.

#8 Anti-aging creams work better at night.

Like vampires, some anti-aging creams work best when the sun goes down—but not all. "Any anti-aging cream that contains retinoids, peptides, AHAs, or BHAs should be used at night," says Graf. "While you sleep, blood flow to the skin increases, the PH level decreases, and the protective barrier is weakened. These ingredients work best under these conditions." Other anti-agers are crucial during the day. "Antioxidants and SPF are key for daytime," Graf says.

#9 If a cream isn't showing results in a few weeks, move on.

Unlike a bad blind date, anti-agers take time to show their true colors. "After a few weeks, you should notice that your skin is plumper and smoother," says Waldorf. More dramatic changes require patience. "Reducing the appearance of fine lines can take up to three months," says Downie. Even more substantial changes, "like reducing discoloration and wrinkles, can take up to six months—no matter what the strength of the formula," Waldorf says. Some creams provide instant results, but that's because ingredients that cause a temporary effect, such as light-reflective particles, have been added.

#10 Tingling, redness, and flaking are normal side effects of anti-agers.

Put down the ice pack and step away from the concealer. It's mainly certain alpha and beta hydroxy acids and old-school prescription retinoids that "cause some redness, scaling, and itchiness when you first start using them," Waldorf says. And to a lesser degree, vitamin C products and anything in a gel base can be irritating, too. We used to think that irritation meant it was working, but "now we know that it can be just a bad side effect," Graf says. "In fact, anti-agers work much better on healthy skin that isn't irritated." Gentler formulas, such as prescription Retin-A Micro, cause minimal irritation. And some anti-agers, such as peptides, aren't irritating at all. If you do experience mild redness or peeling, usually all it takes to calm the skin is reducing the frequency of application, a little restraint, and daily SPF. If you have an excessive reaction, see a doctor. "When I prescribe a retinoid, I recommend that patients use it twice a week for two weeks. Then, most women can use it every other day or even daily," Waldorf says. Retinoid-treated skin is more prone to sunburns, so "a daily dose of SPF 30 or above is vital, too," says Day. And while it may be tempting to slather on retinoids, "just a pea-size dot for your entire face is enough," Day says. "Retinoids are not soothing night creams—a little goes a long way."

#11 If you use retinoids on your face, you can't get an upper-lip or eyebrow wax.

Nothing—not even retinoids—should stand between a woman and her mustache. To prevent burning or peeling, "anyone using retinoids, alpha hydroxy acids, or beta hydroxy acids should lay off them for two days before the wax and two days after—and let the waxer know what you're doing," Waldorf says. "Right after the wax, apply a 1 percent hydrocortisone cream to the area to reduce irritation." Gentler anti-agers such as peptides and antioxidants do not affect waxing at all.

#12 A sunscreen with SPF 15 can prevent wrinkles.

SPF 15 isn't enough to keep you crease-free—no matter how diligently you apply it. "SPF 15 gives you just 93.5 percent protection from UVB rays; SPF 30 gives you 97 percent protection; SPF 45 gives you 98 percent protection; and so on," Downie says. To protect yourself from the UVA rays that cause collagen and elastin damage and melanoma, be sure that it includes "either stabilized avobenzone [such as Helioplex], Mexoryl, titanium dioxide, or zinc oxide," says Waldorf. Two good sunscreens: Neutrogena Dry Touch SPF 55 with Helioplex and Burt's Bees Chemical-Free Sunscreen SPF 30, which contains titanium dioxide.

#13 Nothing short of a scalpel can firm sagging skin.

Creams that stimulate collagen "can help a bit," says Waldorf, but "once the skin really starts to lose elasticity, it needs fillers such as Restylane, Juvaderm, or Radiesse, or radio-frequency treatments such as Thermage, to reverse sagging."

Michael Thompson (cover), Greg Kadel