BEAUTY

Your Skin Routine Does Not Need Ten Steps

The evidence supports a short list of useful habits-and gives you permission to leave the rest on the shelf.

The shelf gets crowded fast

You start with a cream. Then another product promises smoother skin, a third claims to repair it, and suddenly your bathroom shelf looks like a small laboratory. The ten-step routine offers an appealing answer to every concern: there is always one more layer you could add.

But a long routine is not automatically a well-supported one. The available evidence favors a few broad practices-gentle cleansing, a suitable leave-on product and protection from ultraviolet (UV) rays. It does not show that skin needs ten separate products, or that piling them up produces ten times the benefit.

That distinction matters because cosmetics are products used to clean the body or change its appearance. Some products are also drugs because they treat or prevent disease; these list an active ingredient, the chemical intended to make the product effective. Most of the bottles competing for space in a beauty routine are not interchangeable with proven medical care.

So begin by changing the question. Instead of asking which ten steps belong in your routine, ask what job each product is doing. Cleaning, helping dry skin and limiting sun exposure have support. Beyond those jobs, the evidence supplied here cannot tell you that another essence, cream or layer will improve your skin.

Keep the jobs that matter

Cleansing earns a place, but the kind of cleansing matters more than ceremony. A 2023 umbrella review of 12 systematic reviews found that structured skin-care programs using low-irritating cleansers and leave-on products were preferable to unstructured care with traditional soap and water for maintaining skin integrity and preventing several forms of skin damage.

That finding is broader than a fashionable facial routine. The review covered different ages and skin conditions, including dry skin, skin tears and irritation associated with incontinence. It also came with an important limitation: much of the skin-care review literature had a high risk of bias, and the included studies varied substantially in their designs, methods and outcomes.

A 2020 systematic review focused on older people reached a similar practical conclusion. Across 63 articles, cleansers containing synthetic detergents or amphoteric surfactants performed better for dryness than standard soap and water. Leave-on products containing water-attracting ingredients reduced dryness and itching, while products containing glycerin and petrolatum reduced skin tears.

Those results support categories, not a shopping list. They suggest that a low-irritating cleanser and an appropriate leave-on product can help protect the skin barrier, particularly when dryness is the problem. They do not establish that you need multiple cleansers, several leave-on layers or a separate product for every part of your face.

The hardest truth on the shelf is simple: a claim is not the same thing as evidence.

Sun protection outranks another serum

If your routine is meant to address skin aging, sunlight deserves more attention than the number of bottles you use. Sunlight is a major cause of skin aging, while aging skin naturally becomes thinner, drier, less plump and slower to heal. Wrinkles and age spots may become more noticeable over time.

Too much UV exposure also causes most skin cancers. Those rays come from the sun and tanning beds, can damage skin cells and still reach you on cloudy or cool days. They can reflect from water, cement, sand and snow. Indoor tanning exposes skin to intense UV radiation, and a tan or burn after exposure is a sign of injury rather than health.

Protection is not limited to sunscreen. Shade, clothing that covers the arms and legs, a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses that block both ultraviolet A (UVA) and ultraviolet B (UVB) rays all have a role. General public-health guidance also recommends broad-spectrum sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 15 on exposed skin.

This is the awkward hierarchy behind the ten-step routine: the least glamorous step may carry the clearest stakes. A complicated evening ritual cannot undo exposure from the sun or a tanning bed. If time, money or patience is limited, another cosmetic layer should not crowd out the measures linked to lower skin-cancer risk.

More products mean more opportunities to react

Every addition is also another cosmetic your skin must encounter. Cosmetics can cause allergic reactions, and the first sign is often red, irritated skin. Fragrances and preservatives are the most common causes of cosmetic-related skin problems described in the available

guidance.

That does not mean every extra product will cause trouble. It means complexity has a cost that beauty routines rarely advertise: when redness appears, a shelf full of products gives you more ingredients to consider. Manufacturers must list cosmetic ingredients on the container, so the label is more useful than the mood created by the front of the jar.

Be especially cautious about reassuring language. "Natural" and "hypoallergenic" have no official meaning for cosmetics; companies can use those terms as they choose. They do not prove that a product will be gentle, effective or free from ingredients that may bother your skin.

Nor should an anti-aging promise be mistaken for approval. Many products claim to revitalize aging skin or reduce wrinkles, but the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved only a few products for sun-damaged or aging skin. The hardest truth on the shelf is simple: a claim is not the same thing as evidence.

If a cosmetic leaves your skin red and irritated, this has stopped being a routine-optimization problem. Cosmetics can cause allergic reactions, and health questions belong with a healthcare professional-not with another product recommendation or a label promising gentleness.

Build the routine backward

For the next week, do not begin by throwing everything away. Begin with an audit. For each item, name its job without borrowing the promise printed on the package. Is it cleaning? Is it a leave-on product you use for dryness? Is it part of protecting exposed skin from UV rays? If you cannot name the job, the evidence here gives you no reason to treat it as essential.

Then notice duplication. Several products may all be cosmetics intended to alter appearance, while only one low-irritating cleanser is needed to perform the cleansing job. Several creams may occupy the leave-on category, but the reviews did not identify one universally superior product or show that stacking several was better.

Keep your expectations proportional to the research. The strongest useful message is not that one perfect routine has been discovered. It is that structured care with a gentle cleanser and a leave-on product appears better for skin integrity than an unstructured soap-and-water approach, although the underlying studies are varied and much of the wider review literature is vulnerable to bias.

Finally, protect your skin from the sun and skip tanning beds. Let everything else earn its place through a clear purpose, tolerability and realistic expectations. This week, your goal is not to

complete ten steps. It is to stop mistaking ten purchases for ten pieces of evidence.

Where this comes from

- Skin Aging

  MedlinePlus, U.S. National Library of Medicine · https://medlineplus.gov/skinaging.html
- Cosmetics

  MedlinePlus, U.S. National Library of Medicine · https://medlineplus.gov/cosmetics.html
- Reducing Risk for Skin Cancer

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