BEAUTY

The Teen Skincare Routine That Keeps Things Simple

Four evidence-based steps separate useful skincare from the crowded shelf of products your teenager does not need.

Step 1: Clean with a gentle cleanser

The bathroom shelf can fill up fast: scrubs, scented washes, masks and bottles promising clearer or more attractive skin. But a teenager's routine does not need to begin with a shopping spree. It needs a reliable first step. Use a gentle, low-irritating cleanser to remove what has accumulated on the skin without turning cleansing into an aggressive campaign against it.

An umbrella review of 12 systematic reviews found that structured skincare programs using low-irritating cleansers and leave-on products were better than unstructured care with classic soap and water for maintaining skin integrity. The included research covered different ages and skin conditions, and much of the wider skincare literature had a high risk of bias. That makes the broad principle more defensible than any claim that a particular cleanser can transform teenage skin.

Cosmetic products can cause allergic reactions, often beginning with red, irritated skin. Fragrances and preservatives are the most common causes of cosmetic-related skin problems. If a new cleanser appears to make the skin red or irritated, adding more products will make it harder to identify the culprit. Stop and inspect the ingredient list on the container; manufacturers are required to provide one.

Do not let reassuring words on the front of a bottle do the thinking for you. Labels such as "natural" and "hypoallergenic" have no official meaning, so companies can use them however they choose. The useful information is the product type and ingredient list. This step takes a gentle cleanser. Scrubs, masks, toners and essences are not required to complete it.

Step 2: Choose one acne active if needed

Not every teenager needs an acne treatment. If spots are the reason for building the routine, however, choose one evidence-supported active rather than stacking several fashionable products. A 2024 evidence-based guideline strongly recommended benzoyl peroxide and

topical retinoids for acne. It conditionally recommended salicylic acid and azelaic acid, meaning the support for those options was less certain.

Check whether the container lists an "active ingredient." A cosmetic intended to treat or prevent disease is also a drug, and the active ingredient is the chemical responsible for its effect. That distinction matters. A face cream may change how skin looks or feels; an acne product makes a treatment claim. Choosing by the named active is more useful than choosing by packaging or a vague promise of purity.

More is not automatically more effective. The guideline supports combining topical treatments with different mechanisms in acne care, but that does not mean a teenager should improvise a complicated mixture. Some acne ingredients-including retinoids, salicylic acid and benzoyl peroxide-can make skin more sensitive to the sun. A simple routine makes it easier to notice irritation and keeps sun protection visible as part of acne care, not an optional extra.

This is also where a bathroom routine can become a medical conversation. The guideline strongly recommends oral isotretinoin when acne is severe, causes scarring or substantial psychosocial burden, or has not improved with standard topical or oral therapy. Those situations are not a reason to buy another mask. They are reasons to talk with a healthcare professional about treatment. This step takes one acne product with an evidence-supported active, if acne treatment is actually needed.

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Step 3: Add a plain moisturiser

A moisturiser is the quiet part of the routine. It does not need a dramatic story. It is a leave-on product, and evidence from an umbrella review indicates that structured programs combining low-irritating cleansing with leave-on products can help maintain skin integrity and prevent skin damage across a wide range of conditions and ages. The reviews could not establish that one leave-on product was superior to another.

That uncertainty is useful. It means there is no evidence here for building a hierarchy of elaborate creams. A plain moisturiser completes the basic pairing supported by the review: gentle cleansing followed by a leave-on product. If an acne active has made the routine feel like a battle against the skin, moisturiser is a reminder that the goal is care, not punishment.

Again, the ingredient list matters more than front-label language. Fragrances and preservatives are common causes of cosmetic skin problems, and redness or irritation may be the first indication of an allergic reaction. A long routine creates a detective problem because several products could be responsible. Introduce restraint before introducing another bottle.

A teenager may still enjoy makeup, perfume or other cosmetic products; those choices do not have to be presented as medical necessities. Cosmetics include products used to clean the body, make it more attractive or change its appearance. Enjoyment and treatment are different jobs. This step takes a moisturiser that can be left on the skin comfortably-not a toner, essence and mask pretending to be three essential stages.

Step 4: Finish with sunscreen

Sun protection is the step doing work beyond today's appearance. Sunburn means ultraviolet (UV) rays have damaged the skin, and a sunburn at any age increases the risk of skin cancer. Anyone can burn, regardless of race, ethnicity or skin tone. Sunlight is also a major cause of skin ageing, although wrinkles and age spots may feel like distant concerns to a teenager.

Use a broad-spectrum sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 15 or higher on exposed skin. Protection matters throughout the year because UV rays can reach skin on cloudy and cool days. They also reflect from water, cement, sand and snow. Sunscreen is only one part of protection: shade, covering clothing, a wide-brimmed hat and wraparound sunglasses that block ultraviolet A and ultraviolet B rays also have roles.

If the skin is already pink or red, warm, tender, painful, swollen or blistered after sun exposure, stay out of the sun until it heals. Serious sunburn, dehydration, a fever above 101 degrees Fahrenheit or 38.3 degrees Celsius, extreme pain lasting more than two days, or signs of infected blisters need medical attention. That is no longer a question about refining a skincare routine.

On Monday, clear the shelf and set out only what the routine requires: a gentle cleanser, one acne product if needed, a plain moisturiser and broad-spectrum sunscreen. Keep the ingredient lists available, and write down which product was added if irritation appears. A routine should reduce guesswork, not manufacture it. Four ordinary objects-and the willingness to leave unnecessary ones alone-are enough to begin.

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

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