BEAUTY

How to Repair an Overworked Skin Barrier

A pared-back routine can protect irritated skin while helping you spot when the problem needs medical care.

Step 1: Pause with the ingredient lists

Your skin is red and irritated, and the bathroom shelf offers six possible solutions. That shelf may also contain the problem. Before adding another serum, oil or mask, pause and look closely at the cosmetics already touching your skin.

Cosmetics can cause allergic reactions, often first appearing as red, irritated skin. Fragrances and preservatives are the most common causes of cosmetic-related skin problems. That does not prove one of them is responsible for your reaction, but it makes an ingredient check more useful than trusting the front of the container.

Manufacturers must list every ingredient in a cosmetic on its container. Read those lists and set aside products that appeared around the time the irritation began, especially fragranced ones. Keep the containers rather than relying on memory: if the problem continues, the ingredient lists may help you explain what you used to a health care professional.

Do not let reassuring language overrule what your skin is doing. Terms such as "natural" and "hypoallergenic" have no official meaning, so a company can use them without proving that its product will not irritate you. "Natural" is not another word for safe, either. A simpler shelf cannot identify an allergy, but it can make the situation easier to read.

Step 2: Clean with a low-irritating cleanser

Barrier care begins with a less aggressive clean, not a more elaborate one. What this step takes is a low-irritating cleanser rather than standard soap and water. Skip the urge to compensate with a long sequence of cosmetic extras; the cleanser's job here is simply to clean.

The best direct evidence comes from older adults, so it should not be stretched into a universal promise. A 2020 systematic review of 63 articles found that cleansers containing synthetic detergents, known as syndets, or amphoteric surfactants improved skin dryness compared with standard soap and water in aged people. The studies varied substantially in design, products and outcomes.

That limitation matters. "Damaged barrier" is a broad beauty phrase, while the review examined specific problems such as dryness, itching, skin tears and general barrier function in an older population. It supports choosing a low-irritating cleanser for dry, vulnerable skin. It does not establish that one cleanser can repair every red or uncomfortable face.

Nor does this step require a toner, essence or botanical remedy. Evidence for complementary approaches to skin conditions is often sparse, with studies generally small or poorly designed. For eczema specifically, benefits have not been established for many swallowed supplements and oils, including fish oil, vitamin E, vitamin D, zinc, hempseed oil and sunflower oil. A complicated routine is not automatically a better-supported one.

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Step 3: Moisturise with glycerin or petrolatum

This is the step doing most of the barrier-care work. It takes a leave-on moisturiser, ideally one whose ingredient list includes a humectant such as glycerin and a more oil-loving ingredient such as petrolatum. You do not need a rejuvenating claim on the front of the container to find those ingredients on the back.

In the 2020 review of skin care in older adults, oil-loving leave-on products containing humectants reduced dryness and itching. Formulations containing glycerin and petrolatum also reduced the incidence of skin tears. Products with a lower pH improved barrier measures, although the wide variety of methods used across the studies makes close product comparisons difficult.

Moisturisers also have strong support in a different setting: adult atopic dermatitis, also called eczema. A 2023 guideline based on a systematic review strongly recommended moisturisers among the topical options for adults with the condition. It also strongly recommended several prescription treatments, which is an important reminder that moisturiser is supportive care, not a substitute for medical treatment when eczema is active.

The evidence does not show that the most ornate formula is the most effective. It points instead to a modest group of useful features: low-irritating cleansing, a leave-on product with humectants, and ingredients such as glycerin and petrolatum. Fragrance may make a cream feel more luxurious, but fragrance is also among the most common causes of cosmetic skin problems. The ingredient list deserves more attention than the promise on the jar.

Step 4: Build a three-item reset kit

On Monday, clear a small space beside the bathroom sink. What this step takes is a low-irritating cleanser, a plain moisturiser with glycerin or petrolatum, and a sunscreen. Keep the ingredient lists available. The point is not to create a permanent minimalist identity; it is to make your routine understandable while irritated skin settles.

Sun protection belongs in that small kit because sunlight is a major cause of skin ageing, and ageing skin becomes thinner, drier and slower to heal. General guidance recommends staying out of the strongest sun, wearing protective clothing and using sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 15 or higher. Avoid sunlamps and tanning beds as well.

Be precise about what these three objects can and cannot do. The cleanser may reduce the drying effect seen with standard soap in older adults. The moisturiser has evidence for dryness and barrier support, including in aged skin and adult eczema. Sunscreen reduces further exposure to a major source of skin ageing. None of them can tell you whether persistent irritation is an allergy, eczema or another skin condition.

If your skin worsens or does not improve, the experiment ends and the medical conversation begins. Some skin problems can reflect an underlying medical issue, and persistent or worsening changes should be assessed by a health care professional. Bring the cosmetic containers or write down their ingredients. For the next week, your job is smaller: one gentle cleanser, one plain moisturiser, one sunscreen-and enough empty sink space to see what you are actually using.

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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