

Your face does not need a drinks cabinet.

Vitamin C, retinol, niacinamide, peptides and what those expensive little bottles actually do.



01

What vitamin C, retinol, niacinamide and peptides actually do

02

Why the label tells you far less than the price suggests

03

How to reset a shelf that has become its own side effect

INSIDE

Eight bottles. Eight different jobs.

The word 'serum' is packaging information, not a skincare plan.

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This issue is built for the person standing in front of a shelf of tiny bottles, each claiming to brighten, smooth, calm, hydrate and restore something the bottle beside it also claims to handle. You do not need to memorise cosmetic chemistry, although you do need to know what problem you are trying to

solve. The chapters can be read in order, but they do not demand it.

You can go directly to the ingredient already occupying your bathroom cabinet, then use the practical box to decide whether it has a sensible job or merely excellent packaging.



OPENING FEATURE

The little bottles have formed a government.

Every one has a policy, a budget and a firm belief that it should be applied first.

The average serum collection begins innocently with one bottle bought for dehydration, although it seldom remains a one-bottle administration for long. Vitamin C arrives for brightness, niacinamide joins for pores, hyaluronic acid handles hydration, and retinol is appointed to deal with the future. Six weeks later, the shelf looks wonderfully informed while the skin feels tight, shiny, bumpy and offended by tap water.

Nobody can tell which product helped because three were started together, two are hidden inside the moisturiser as well, and the newest serum has already been promoted to twice-daily use by an enthusiastic stranger online.

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The first useful fact is that a serum is a format rather than an ingredient or treatment category. It usually describes a relatively light product designed to deliver particular ingredients, but the word alone

does not tell you what those ingredients are, whether the finished formula works, or whether your skin needs them. This matters because ingredient reputation travels much faster than formulation evidence. A study involving one concentration in one carefully made product cannot automatically validate every bottle carrying the same fashionable word, just as owning flour does not mean you have produced a decent cake.

British cosmetic rules require products to be safe and marketing claims to be supportable, but a legal cosmetic can still be unnecessary for your face. The product may be perfectly respectable while duplicating ingredients already present in your cleanser, cream or sunscreen, which is how a simple routine develops three separate departments for niacinamide.

The sensible question is not whether an ingredient is good in the abstract. You need to know what concern it may help, whether the product is tolerable, what else is already doing the same job and how you will judge any change without moving the goalposts every four days. Some serums can genuinely improve hydration, texture, uneven tone or mild congestion when the formulation and person are well matched. They remain cosmetics rather than tiny moral achievements, so using more of them does not demonstrate greater commitment to your face.



01 / THE LABEL

Serum is not a job description.

The bottle has told you how it feels, but it has not yet explained why it exists.

A light texture can be pleasant, easy to layer and useful for delivering an ingredient without a heavy cream, which explains why serums have become so popular.

That popularity has also allowed the category to become magnificently vague. Two serums can have almost nothing meaningful in common beyond a pipette. One may contain a humectant for temporary surface hydration, another may carry an exfoliating acid, and a third may contain retinol with enough potential for irritation to make the first two look like mineral water.

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You should begin with the concern rather than the ingredient trend.

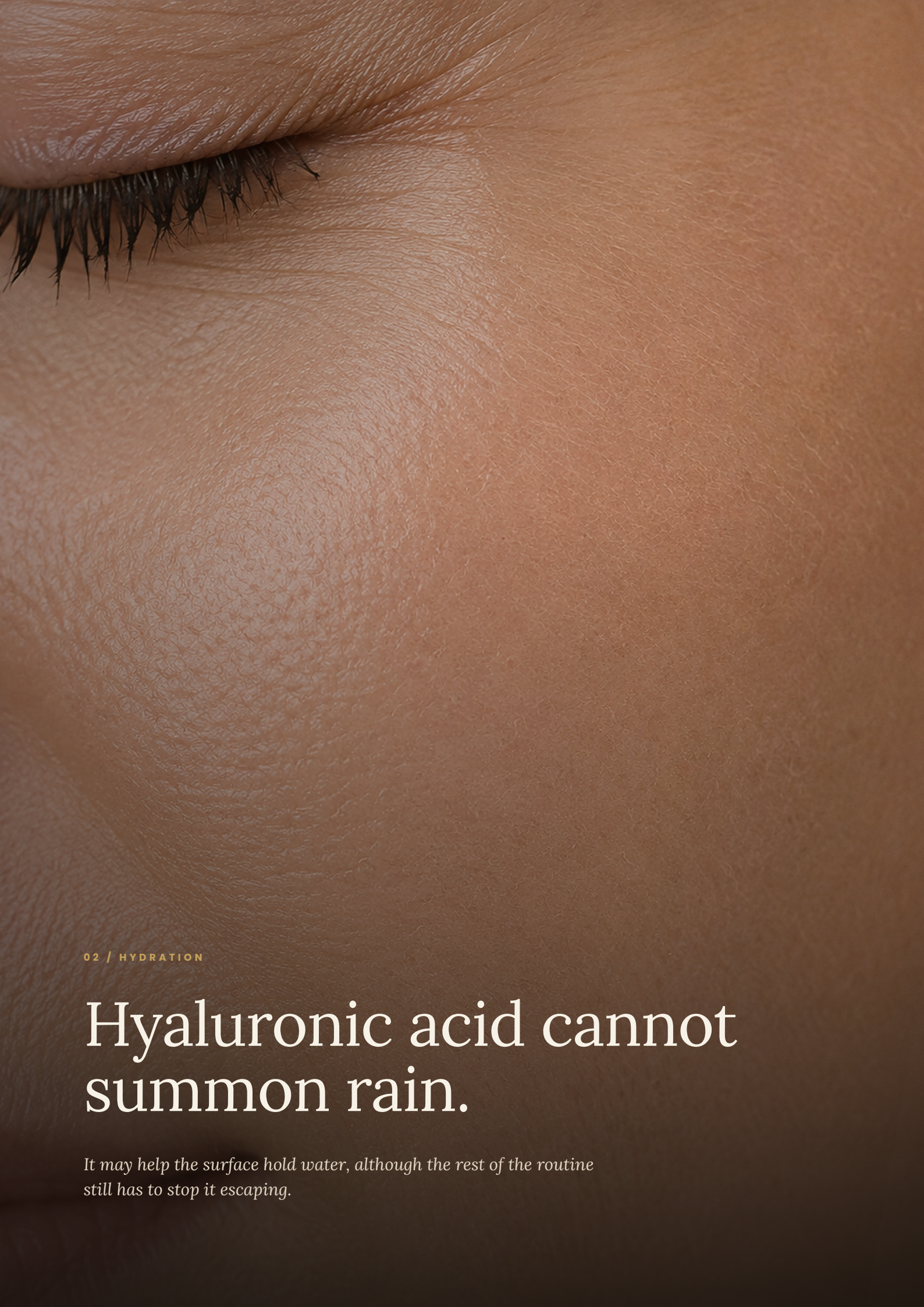
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The ingredient list helps, but it does not behave like a recipe printed with exact quantities and manufacturing instructions. Ingredients normally appear in descending order until concentrations reach one per cent, after which ordering can vary, while the effectiveness of the finished product also

depends on formulation, stability, packaging and how it is used. A high percentage on the front can be useful information when the ingredient and claim make that number meaningful. It can also become the cosmetic equivalent of a car manufacturer printing the engine temperature on the bonnet because a larger figure looked more serious in the meeting. You should begin with the concern rather than the ingredient trend.

Dryness, dehydration, persistent redness, acne, pigmentation and fine lines are different conversations, and some of them need assessment before any product recommendation becomes sensible. The next step is checking what already exists in the routine because many moisturisers and sunscreens contain niacinamide, glycerin, antioxidants or barrier-supporting ingredients.

Buying a separate serum for every ingredient can turn perfectly useful formulation into an expensive exercise in repetition. The product also needs a fair trial, which means introducing it without three companions and allowing an appropriate period before judging the result. A photograph taken in the same light each week is less dramatic than inspecting a pore at midnight, but it produces far better evidence.



02 / HYDRATION

Hyaluronic acid cannot summon rain.

*It may help the surface hold water, although the rest of the routine
still has to stop it escaping.*

Hyaluronic acid has acquired the sort of reputation normally reserved for emergency water tankers, which makes disappointment almost inevitable when a light serum fails to rescue genuinely dry skin. Its name also sounds alarming until one remembers that cosmetic chemistry has never employed a naming department concerned with bedside manner. Hyaluronic acid and glycerin are humectants, which means they help attract and hold water within the upper layers of skin when used in a suitable formula. That can make the surface feel smoother and look temporarily plumper, particularly when dehydration has made fine lines more obvious.

Dehydration and dry skin overlap, but they are not identical.

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An attractive blue bottle cannot rule out dermatitis.

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Skin may lack water at the surface while also producing too little protective oil, and a watery serum cannot replace every emollient or occlusive job performed by a well-formulated moisturiser.

The internet often insists that hyaluronic acid must always be applied to dripping skin or it will turn on its owner and extract the last available molecule of water from the face. Finished formulations are more complicated than this story, so the product instructions and the response of your own skin are more useful than a universal ritual involving a spray bottle.

Molecular weight, concentration and the rest of the formula can influence how a hyaluronic product behaves, while glycerin has a long history as an effective moisturising ingredient without acquiring quite the same red-carpet following. The less glamorous ingredient may already be doing excellent work inside a cream that costs considerably less.

You should judge a hydration serum by comfort, reduced tightness and how the skin behaves beneath moisturiser or makeup. It will not rebuild lost facial volume, erase established wrinkles or replace injectable hyaluronic acid, despite sharing part of a name with something used for an entirely different purpose. When skin remains rough, itchy, cracked or persistently sore, the problem may extend beyond ordinary dehydration. A stronger hydration serum is not an assessment, and an attractive blue bottle cannot rule out dermatitis.

03 / VITAMIN C

Vitamin C and the orange problem.

The ingredient can be useful, although the bottle still has to survive light, air and your bathroom shelf.



Vitamin C is an antioxidant with a plausible and researched role in supporting skin affected by ultraviolet exposure and uneven tone, although that sentence has been stretched across enough marketing copy to cover a small county. The evidence does not make every vitamin C serum equal.

Pure L-ascorbic acid can be difficult to formulate because it is unstable and needs the right conditions to reach the skin effectively. Cosmetic companies also use vitamin C derivatives with different stability and delivery characteristics, which means two products displaying the same headline may contain quite different chemistry. A properly formulated product may support brighter, more even-looking skin and improve some visible signs of photodamage over time. It remains an addition to sun protection rather than a replacement for it, because antioxidants do not give permission to ignore shade, clothing or sunscreen. Packaging matters because repeated exposure to air and light may degrade some formulas.

Dark or opaque containers and clear storage instructions can be more useful than a pipette designed mainly to look handsome beside a bathroom mirror.

Colour requires some judgement because certain formulas begin with a tint, while others change noticeably as they age. A marked alteration in colour, smell or texture deserves attention to the manufacturer's instructions and period-after-opening guidance rather than a confident diagnosis made from a social-media photograph. More vitamin C is not automatically more effective when the result is a face that stings every morning.

Concentration, acidity, vehicle and frequency all affect tolerability, and sensitive skin may prefer a gentler formula or no dedicated vitamin C serum at all. The product should be judged over time using consistent photographs and a stable routine, not by the tingling sensation immediately after application. Tingling proves that nerve endings are present, which was not previously in serious doubt.

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04 / NIACINAMIDE

Niacinamide has entered everything.

*It may already be in the moisturiser, cleanser and SPF before the
ten per cent serum joins the meeting.*

Niacinamide is a form of vitamin B3 used in many cosmetic formulas because it can support barrier function and may improve the appearance of uneven tone, texture, redness and oiliness. It is useful, versatile and now present in enough products to qualify for its own loyalty card. Clinical research has reported improvements with formulas containing around five per cent niacinamide, although that does not create a rule that every person needs exactly that strength.

It certainly does not prove that ten or twenty per cent must work twice or four times as well. High headline percentages are easy to compare on a shopping page, which makes them commercially irresistible. Skin is less impressed by arithmetic, particularly when a stronger formula increases stinging or redness without producing a meaningfully better result. The finished product matters because niacinamide may sit alongside moisturising ingredients, antioxidants or other actives that alter the overall experience.

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*Percentage collecting is not
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A well-designed moisturiser containing niacinamide may suit the routine better than a separate serum, especially when the shelf already contains several treatment steps. Some people tolerate niacinamide beautifully while others report flushing, itching or irritation from a particular formula.

That reaction does not prove the ingredient is universally harmful, and the ingredient's good reputation does not require anybody to continue using a bottle that makes her face uncomfortable.

Niacinamide may support the appearance of enlarged pores by influencing oiliness and surface texture, but it cannot physically close pores because pores do not possess tiny drawstrings. The aim is a more balanced appearance rather than an airbrushed surface. A separate serum earns its place when the ingredient addresses a defined concern, the formula is tolerated and the routine does not already deliver the same thing three times. Percentage collecting is not skincare, even when the bottles line up beautifully.

A close-up, high-resolution photograph of a person's face, focusing on the skin texture and a visible redness or irritation on the cheek. The person's eye is partially closed, and their lips are slightly parted. The lighting is soft, highlighting the fine lines and pores of the skin.

05 / ACIDS

Acid is a family name, not a personality.

Glycolic, lactic, salicylic and azelaic acid do not perform the same job simply because the labels sound related.

The beauty industry has made acid sound both terrifying and oddly domestic, because it is now applied between brushing the teeth and locating a missing school shoe. The category still needs more respect than the average nightly acid cocktail receives. Alpha hydroxy acids such as glycolic and lactic acid mainly exfoliate at the skin surface and may improve rough texture or some visible signs of photodamage in suitable formulas. Salicylic acid is oil-soluble and is often chosen for blocked pores and mild acne-prone skin, while azelaic acid occupies its own lane and may appear in cosmetic or medicinal products depending on the formulation and claims.

These ingredients are not interchangeable, and the word 'acid' does not tell you strength, acidity, delivery or tolerability. A low percentage in one formula may behave differently from a higher percentage in another, which makes competitive label reading a fairly poor substitute for product instructions.

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*Skin does not issue medals for
maximum exfoliation.*
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Exfoliation can make the surface feel smoother quickly, which encourages frequent use before the skin has finished expressing an opinion. Burning, persistent redness, tightness and shiny peeling skin are not signs that the product has located hidden impurities and begun a heroic clearance operation. The common mixing lists online are also too simple because compatibility depends on the actual products, frequency, skin condition and professional advice.

Two ingredients may coexist perfectly well in formulation science while becoming intolerable when a person layers separate strong products every evening. Mild congestion may respond to a carefully selected product, but painful, deep, widespread or scarring acne deserves medical assessment. Persistent redness or a rash around the mouth can be mistaken for acne, and treating the wrong condition with more acid is an efficient way to add irritation without improving the diagnosis. The correct acid is the one chosen for a clear concern and used at a tolerable frequency, which may turn out to be no acid at all. Skin does not issue medals for maximum exfoliation.



06 / RETINOLIDS

Retinol does not need a hazing ceremony.

Peeling for three months is not proof that the product has accepted you into an exclusive club.

Retinoids are vitamin A derivatives, and this family includes cosmetic retinol products as well as medicines such as topical tretinoin or adapalene. The family relationship matters, although it does not make a cosmetic retinol serum equivalent to a prescribed acne treatment.

Research supports retinol and some retinoids for improvements in fine lines, texture and aspects of photoaged skin, while medicinal topical retinoids are also used in acne care. Results develop over weeks or months, and the most convincing evidence does not include waking up ten years younger after the first application. Irritation remains common because retinoids can cause dryness, stinging, redness and peeling, particularly when introduced too aggressively or combined with an already ambitious exfoliating routine.

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You should follow the directions for the specific product, introduce it cautiously and keep the rest of the routine understandable. Sunscreen matters because ultraviolet exposure continues to drive photoageing whether or not the evening serum has an impressive waiting list. Pregnancy requires a firm boundary rather than casual internet reassurance. Topical retinoid medicines are contraindicated during pregnancy as a precaution, and anyone who is pregnant, planning pregnancy or unsure about a retinol product should speak to a pharmacist, midwife, GP or relevant prescriber before use. Retinol also has limits because it can improve skin quality without lifting facial tissue, replacing lost volume or removing every line.

A living face continues to move, age and spend occasional nights awake, all of which remain stubbornly outside the authority of a serum. Persistent severe irritation deserves more than an instruction to push through. The product can be reduced, changed or stopped, because skincare is not improved by turning foreseeable side effects into a personality test.

Your face is not a product testing department.

One useful change can be assessed, while six simultaneous changes merely produce paperwork.





07 / PEPTIDES

Peptides arrive wearing a lab coat.

*The science may be interesting, although the finished product still
has to prove its own claim.*

Peptides are short chains of amino acids, and cosmetic formulas use different peptide families for different proposed effects. The category is broad enough to sound highly scientific while remaining conveniently difficult to summarise on the front of a small bottle.

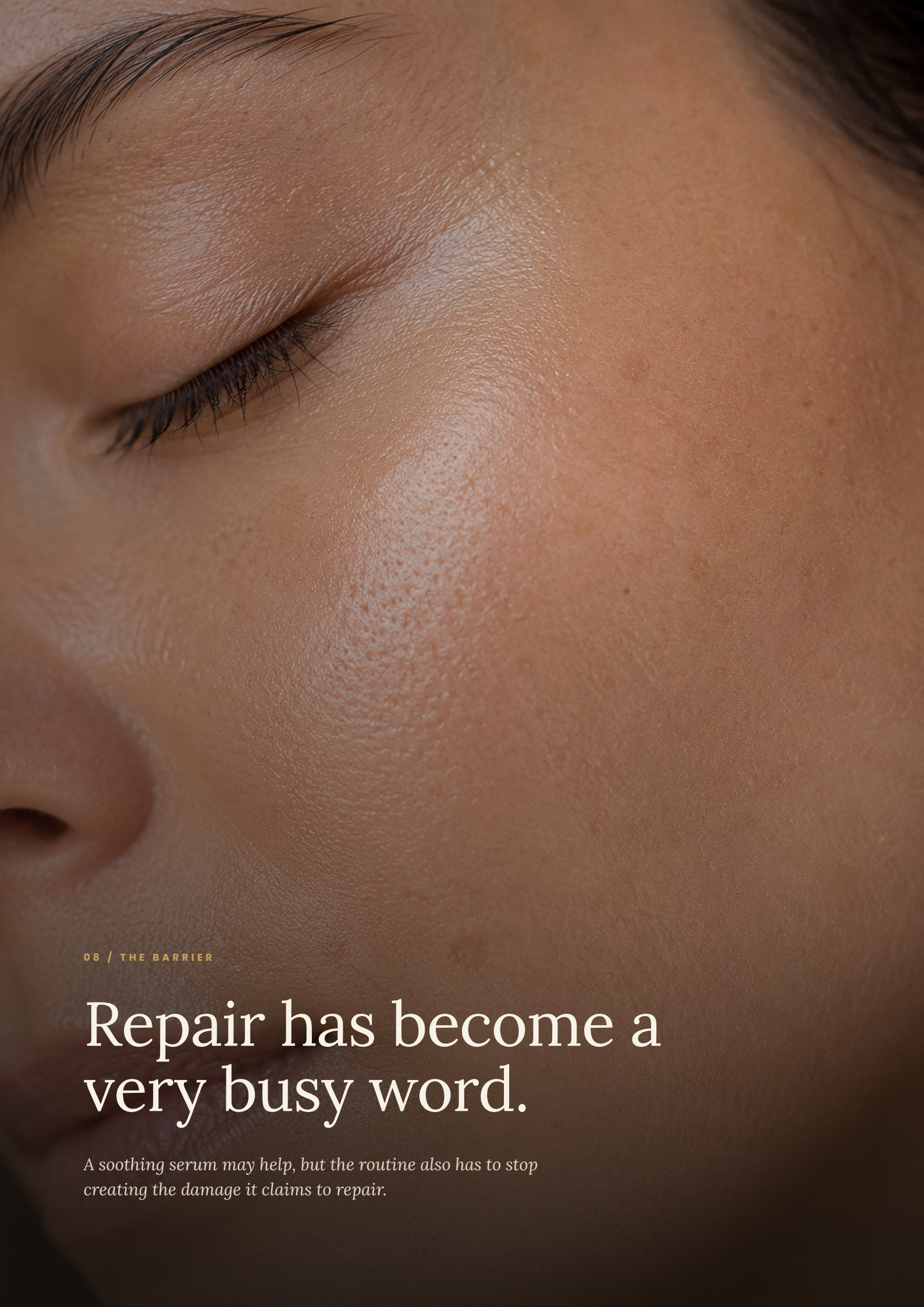
Laboratory mechanisms can be plausible without guaranteeing that a finished serum reaches the relevant site in enough quantity to produce a visible result. Clinical studies exist for certain peptides and formulations, but the evidence is uneven and often specific to the exact product tested. A company cannot responsibly borrow a promising result from one ingredient concentration and use it to validate every unrelated peptide cocktail with a silver lid. The most extravagant claims suggest that a topical peptide can reproduce the effect of an injectable medicine.

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*Skin does not become injectable
from above.*
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Skin does not become injectable from above because the advert uses quotation marks around a dramatic nickname, and modest softening should not be sold as the temporary alteration of muscle activity.

A peptide serum may still be enjoyable and may offer a subtle improvement in hydration or the appearance of fine lines, particularly when the rest of the formula is well designed. The problem begins when a pleasant cosmetic is priced and described as though it has negotiated directly with human ageing. You should look for evidence relating to the finished product, realistic before-and-after conditions and a clear explanation of what improvement was measured.

Small studies, manufacturer funding and short follow-up do not make evidence worthless, although they should make the promises smaller. Anyone expecting structural lifting from a pipette has been sold the bottle a role that belongs to an entirely different department.

A close-up, high-resolution photograph of a person's face, focusing on the eye area. The person's eyes are closed, and their skin appears smooth and slightly dewy. The lighting is soft and warm, highlighting the texture of the skin. The image serves as a background for the text.

08 / THE BARRIER

Repair has become a very busy word.

*A soothing serum may help, but the routine also has to stop
creating the damage it claims to repair.*

Barrier serums often contain humectants, niacinamide, panthenol, ceramides or other ingredients intended to improve hydration and comfort. The category can be genuinely useful when skin feels tight or reactive, although the word 'repair' now appears on products with the confidence of an emergency building contractor. The skin barrier depends on cells, lipids and natural moisturising factors working together at the surface.

A light serum may support part of that system, while a moisturiser can provide additional emollient or occlusive help that a watery formula does not deliver alone.

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Cosmetics can support comfortable skin, but they cannot diagnose the reason a rash keeps returning.

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Ceramides are lipids naturally present in the barrier, but their presence on an ingredient list does not automatically prove that every formula restores the barrier in the same way. Panthenol, glycerin and niacinamide can contribute to comfortable, hydrated skin in suitable formulations. Botanical ingredients such as centella may also appear in calming products, although plant-derived does not mean irritation becomes impossible or allergy has agreed to take the evening off. The largest improvement often comes from removing the source of irritation.

A repair serum cannot negotiate peace while acids, scrubs, retinol and fragranced masks continue arriving at the barrier from four directions. You should simplify the routine, use a comfortable cleanser and moisturiser, and allow the skin to settle before reintroducing anything ambitious.

Persistent, recurrent or severe symptoms may be contact dermatitis, eczema, rosacea or another condition requiring assessment. Cosmetics can support comfortable skin, but they cannot diagnose the reason a rash keeps returning.

THE SHELF RESET

The routine has become its own side effect.

When every bottle treats the irritation caused by another bottle, the cabinet has won.

A troubled serum shelf often contains a sensible product for every individual concern and an entirely unreasonable plan when those products are used together. Brightness, pores, lines, dehydration and pigmentation each have representation, while the skin barrier has been left without a vote. The reset begins by keeping the products already known to be comfortable, which usually means a gentle cleanser, a suitable moisturiser and daily sunscreen. Obvious irritants and recently introduced serums can pause while the skin returns to a calmer baseline. This approach is not a treatment for every skin condition, and symptoms that are severe, persistent or worrying still need appropriate advice.

It does remove enough noise to reveal whether the original problem remains once the routine stops producing a new one every Tuesday.

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A plan that works only on quiet Sundays is a hobby.

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When comfort returns, you should choose the concern that matters most and select one product with one understandable purpose. Introduce it according to directions, take photographs in consistent light and resist adding the matching toner because a delivery banner has begun counting down. Layering order is usually governed by product instructions, texture and tolerability rather than one universal law.

Lighter products often precede creams, but a routine that pills, stings or requires twenty minutes between stages has failed the practical test regardless of how correct the diagram looked online. Morning and evening routines should fit the life of the person using them.

A plan that works only on quiet Sundays is a hobby, while dependable skincare must survive work, children, travel and the moment somebody discovers the bathroom is apparently needed for another purpose. The final shelf may contain no dedicated serum, one hardworking product or two carefully separated actives. The correct number is determined by the skin and goal, which leaves the beauty industry with the deeply inconvenient answer of 'it depends'.

THE SHORT VERSION

Choose the concern before the serum.

This page should work as the screenshot somebody sends to a sister at 8.43pm.

This guide describes ingredient families rather than recommending a particular product, concentration or treatment schedule.

The finished formula, medical history, skin condition and other routine steps can change what is appropriate. No serum belongs above medical assessment when a symptom is new, severe, persistent, rapidly worsening or otherwise concerning.

BEFORE YOU BUY

The consultation is allowed to recommend nothing.

A useful answer may be a simpler routine, pharmacy advice or proper medical assessment.

A proper skincare conversation should begin with the concern in ordinary language rather than the ingredient somebody has already decided to purchase. Tightness, recurring spots, a spreading rash and a changing pigmented mark do not belong in the same serum category simply because all four appear on the face. The first task is deciding whether the concern is cosmetic, whether the basic routine is contributing and whether a pharmacist, GP or dermatologist should become involved.

A changing lesion, persistent dermatitis, painful acne or significant eye symptoms should not be delayed while a cosmetic bottle receives a twelve-week trial.

When the concern is stable and cosmetic, the routine can be checked for duplication, irritation and practical use. The person buying a brightening serum may already own three exfoliants, while the person requesting stronger retinol may actually

need the current product used less often and a moisturiser that does not sting. A recommendation should describe the intended improvement, likely timescale, cost and limitations before the card machine becomes involved. The answer may still be a serum, although the bottle should arrive at the end of the reasoning rather than chairing the meeting from the start.

I am comfortable recommending no new product when the skin needs time, a simpler routine or assessment elsewhere. That decision is not a failed sale because the purpose of professional judgement is to reduce avoidable treatment, not provide a ceremonial route to the till.

You should describe the concern without naming the product you expect to buy.

The routine should be checked for irritation, duplication and inconsistent use.

THE CHECKLIST

- Any condition needing pharmacy or medical assessment should be routed appropriately.
- One realistic priority should be selected before another active ingredient is introduced.
- The product should have a defined job, a tolerable method and a fair review point.
- The routine should be reviewed before another bottle is added.

THE NEW BENCHMARK

A good routine is allowed to look boring.

It works repeatedly, fits real life and does not require a spreadsheet beside the mirror.

The skin feels comfortable, sunscreen is used consistently, active products have identifiable purposes and the owner can miss one evening without believing the entire face has entered decline. A serum may improve one part of that routine, but it does not need to become the star. Cleansing, moisturising and sun protection remain the foundations, while targeted ingredients should sit on top only when they add something useful. The routine should also remain affordable enough to

replace and simple enough to follow during an ordinary week.

A product that requires financial secrecy, refrigerated transport and a silent bathroom for twenty minutes may be marvellous, although it has not yet proved practical. Healthy skin still has pores, lines, pigment variation and occasional spots. The target is improvement that matters to the person wearing the face, not a surface sufficiently blank to secure employment as software.

- Good skincare is usually quieter than the content created to sell it.
- The skin should feel comfortable before ambitious treatment begins.
- Daily sun protection should support any plan addressing visible photodamage or uneven tone.
- Each active product should have one clearly understood purpose.
- The routine should remain affordable, replaceable and realistic on a busy day.
- Persistent or concerning symptoms should receive appropriate assessment.
- Further products should be added only when the evidence justifies them.

FINAL WORD

The pipette is not the clever part.

The useful decision is knowing which bottle deserves a job and which one can remain beautifully unemployed.

Serums are not nonsense, and several ingredients discussed in this issue have credible evidence for specific cosmetic or clinical uses. The difficulty begins when that evidence is detached from the tested formulation and used to give every related bottle an aura of inevitability. You do not need to become a cosmetic chemist before buying skincare, but you should expect the product to explain itself. The concern, ingredient, likely improvement, limitations and instructions should form a coherent story that survives beyond the front label.

A serum that hydrates comfortably, improves uneven tone or supports a well-chosen acne plan may earn its place for years.

Another may duplicate the moisturiser, irritate the barrier or spend eighteen months standing upright in the cabinet because its true purpose was to make

free delivery available. The simplest test is whether you can name the product's job and whether the skin is better with it than without it. If neither answer is clear, the serum has become decor, which is harmless until the decor begins exfoliating every night.

Treatment should stop where symptoms suggest dermatitis, significant acne, rosacea, infection or another medical concern. A cosmetic can keep healthy skin in good condition, but it should not be asked to diagnose disease or delay appropriate care. The final routine may still contain a handsome row of bottles, although every bottle should have survived a rather stern interview. The beauty industry will cope with the rejection because another peptide launch is almost certainly being prepared.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rebecca Beckett is a Registered Nurse and clinical skincare practitioner. Her editorial approach places skin health, realistic outcomes and appropriate medical boundaries ahead of product volume or treatment pressure.

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This supplement is for general education. It does not diagnose a skin condition, prescribe treatment or replace individual medical advice. Cosmetic ingredients can cause irritation or allergy, and prescription medicines require advice from an appropriate healthcare professional. New, changing, severe, persistent or otherwise concerning symptoms should be assessed by a pharmacist, GP or relevant specialist.

Illustrative photography is AI-generated. Images do not depict patients, clinical cases, or the results of any treatment.

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One concern. One useful product.

The remaining bottles can continue their negotiations without involving your face.