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Finding good skin care products on a budget

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For The Inquirer

Eliminates wrinkles. Removes blemishes. Reduces pore size. Reverses the effects of aging. These are just a sampling of claims in an overwhelming market of skin-care products.

Sound too good to be true? Usually, it is. In most cases, the benefits have not been adequately tested, and the claims may be greatly exaggerated, since cosmetics do not go through a U.S. Food and Drug Administration approval process.

But this doesn't mean good skin-care products can't be found - and on a budget. In fact, many skin-care experts recommend a basic skin-care routine, based on ingredients with strong science behind them, for healthy, glowing skin.

Cleansers, exfoliators, and sunscreen can be bought at the drugstore, said Ivona Percec, a plastic surgeon at Penn Medicine's Center for Human Appearance.

A \$65 consultation with an aesthetician in Percec's practice provides a skin-care regimen based on skin type and budget, using over-the-counter products, she said.

Her office sells medical-grade products that have a higher percentage of active ingredients in them - some are prescription medications, such as Retin-A, that require FDA approval. Over-the-counter products contain these same ingredients in lower amounts, Percec said.

Here are some general skin-care tips along with affordable products recommended by experts:


Do some homework. Look up a cosmetic ingredient online to find out more about it, or use a guide such as *A Consumer's Dictionary of Cosmetic Ingredients* by Ruth Winter, recommends Betsy Rubenstone, director of the medical skin-care division at Deme, a center that offers plastic surgery, skin-care, and nutritional counseling in Philadelphia and Wayne.

Consumers can also find useful information on the American Academy of Dermatology's website, including reviews on how to treat certain conditions, said Guy Webster, a clinical professor of dermatology at Thomas Jefferson University.



AKIRA SUWA / Staff Photographer

Harriet Lessy uses a variety of skin-care products, some purchased at the drugstore.

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Learn what works. Retinoic acid has the most evidence when it comes to fighting the signs of aging. It's most commonly known in prescription strength as the brand Retin-A, and over the counter as a less active agent, retinol, Percec said.

Alpha hydroxy acids and antioxidants - Vitamins C and E - can also work to slow or reverse the effects of aging. Other antioxidants work well, but not as much evidence on those is available as on Vitamins C and E, Percec said.

Use a gentle soap to cleanse. Webster advises staying away from designer artisan soaps. Well-known products such as Dove have a reputation to maintain, he said.

"Bar soaps are generally gentler than the liquid. Some people can use soaps that are harsh and get away with it. It depends on your skin. Dove is lovely. Dial is pretty good, but harsher than Dove. Ivory is a harsh soap," he said. (He has not consulted for any of these products.)

Wear sunscreen daily. This helps prevent sun damage that could lead to wrinkles, age spots, or even skin cancer, Webster said.

UVA and UVB protection are both important. Mineral oxides protect against UVA. Percec recommends that patients use a sunscreen with 30 to 40 SPF every two to three hours. The SPF breaks down from sunlight exposure, Percec said.

Assess moisturizers. "It becomes more important to moisturize if your skin is more sensitive, and as you get older," said Webster.

"The formulas between the cheap and the very expensive moisturizers [vary] very little. It's amazing some of the markups you see on the more expensive moisturizers," Webster said. "The studies just don't exist to prove that the more expensive ones are better."

Exfoliate. This allows products to penetrate and get into the skin instead of sitting on top of dead skin layers. Facial brushes and washcloths are the most effective and nonirritating means of exfoliation, Rubenstone said.

Masks with alpha hydroxy acid and retinols and the common scrub are also good. The only concern with scrubs is that the particles should be uniform and the ingredients not too harsh. Exfoliating should take place once a week to start, Rubenstone said, and build up to three times a week.

Consider petroleum jelly. It works well in moisturizing rough, cracked feet, elbows, and hands; dry cuticles and lips; and peeling nails. It's recognized by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration as an over-the-counter skin protectant.

"It can't provide the basic building blocks of skin repair, but it makes the conditions right for the skin to repair itself," said Webster.

A product like CeraVe has ceramides, one of the chemicals skin needs to repair itself from dryness and irritability, said Webster, who has consulted for Coria Laboratories Ltd., the maker of CeraVe.

Harriet Lessy of Philadelphia is putting some of these tips into practice.

An everyday skin routine makes a difference for your skin, said Lessy, a patient of Percec's who has gotten a few fillers and medical facials. She uses products from Percec's office and others she buys at the drugstore.

Lessy, who is in her mid-60s, uses an Aveeno skin-brightening daily scrub every morning. Her moisturizer and mineral powder contain SPF to protect her face from the sun. She scrubs her face once or twice a week with exfoliator to help products work into her skin. At the end of the day, she uses a retinol cream or a night cream.

"I'm a latecomer to taking good care of my skin," Lessy said. "I feel like I have a whole new relationship with my skin that I never had. I look more refreshed than I did two years ago."

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