

## Health

### 6 Things to Know Before Adding Differin to Your Skincare Routine

*Thinking about buying the over-the-counter retinoid Differin? Read this first.*

**KATHLEEN FELTON** | July 23, 2018



Ever since the FDA approved Differin Gel 0.1% for over-the-counter use back in 2016, the product, a form of the retinoid adapalene, has topped countless "best of" lists on women's websites—this one included. Dermatologist Adam Friedman, MD, told us it was one of his favorite products for cystic breakouts, as did Bruce Katz, MD; Dendy Engelman, MD, recommended it to fight body acne; dermatologist Melissa K. Levin, MD, even went so far as to call it one of the best skincare products of all time.

Then there are the user reviews. Differin boasts more than 800 five-star reviews on Amazon, 4.7 stars on CVS, and a near-perfect rating on Target. And the wallet-friendly price tag—a 0.5-oz. tube is just \$12—makes it a far cry from retinol creams that can set you back as much as \$150.

Clearly, there's a pattern here: People who use Differin think it's amazing, and it has the expert stamp of approval for clearer, blemish-free skin, too.

But it's also a prescription-strength formula. As a result, there are a few things to consider before adding it to your nighttime routine. Here, six things everyone should know about this powerful pimple-fighter.

### **It's a retinoid, not a retinol**

While there are many over-the-counter retinol creams on the market, Differin is a retinoid. They're similar, but not exactly the same, explains **Ava Shamban, MD**, a Beverly Hills dermatologist and founder of SKIN FIVE. Both ingredients are derived from vitamin A, a powerhouse anti-ager that increases cell turnover, but retinol is much weaker than its prescription counterpart and can take longer to deliver noticeable results, she says.

Nor are all retinoids the same. "Differin is adapalene and has a slightly different chemical structure than other retinoids, making it less irritating," says Dr. Shamban.

Differin is the only retinoid currently available over the counter; you still need a prescription for its stronger form, Differin Gel 0.3%, as well as for other types of retinoids, such as tretinoin (also known as Retin-A), isotretinoin, and tazarotene.

### **It's not a spot treatment**

Bad breakout? You're probably better off treating it with benzoyl peroxide or salicylic acid. (One of our favorite spot treatments is Neutrogena On-The-Spot Acne Treatment Cream, which has enough benzoyl peroxide to zap zits but not so much to overly dry out skin.)

The reason, experts explain, is that while Differin offers one of the best forms of *defense* against breakouts, it isn't nearly as effective on existing blemishes. "Differin mostly works before acne forms and doesn't target bacteria," says New York City-based dermatologist Debra Jaliman, MD, author of *Skin Rules*. "It's best when used on a regular basis."

Note: Benzoyl peroxide can cause your retinoid to oxidize and become less effective, and salicylic acid can be irritating. So, if you're dealing with an active pimple, you should hold off on Differin while you spot-treat.

### **It doesn't always play well with others**

In addition to salicylic acid and benzoyl peroxide, you shouldn't apply Differin while also using products that contain chemical exfoliators (think: glycolic and alpha-hydroxy acids)

or drying agents (astringents and toners, for example). Like retinoids, exfoliators increase cell turnover, but too much exfoliation can lead to raw, irritated skin. Toners, meanwhile, can be *too* drying when used along with a retinoid.

Instead, follow Differin with an ultra-rich moisturizer that will calm irritation and deliver much-needed hydration. We like CeraVe Moisturizing Lotion (\$13; amazon.com), a cult favorite that's famously gentle.

### **Your skin might not instantly look perfect—and that's normal**

Flaky skin, redness, itchiness, and irritation are common side effects of Differin, experts say. "Almost everyone gets dry [skin] and may have temporary redness," Dr. Shamban notes. To ease the transition, she recommends starting out by using a very small amount of the formula, followed by a moisturizer to combat flaking.

### **It can make you look younger, too**

Talk about double duty: While Differin is well known (and FDA-approved) for treating acne, it shouldn't be discounted as an anti-ager. "It is quite useful as an anti-aging product for the improvement of fine lines and wrinkles, pigmentation, and sallow skin," says Dr. Shamban.

### **It's not for everyone**

The FDA advises that women who are pregnant, trying to get pregnant, or breastfeeding not use Differin. Some studies have linked other retinoids to birth defects, and there aren't enough good studies on adapalene to deem it safe for pregnancy.

You should also skip Differin if you have ultra-sensitive skin or certain skin conditions; Dr. Jaliman recommends those with eczema or seborrheic dermatitis avoid it.

<https://www.health.com/acne/differin-adapalene-gel-what-to-know>