

Health

Adaptogen Skincare Products Are Trending—But Do They Really Work?

By Brigitt Early | September 21, 2018



Adaptogens—healing herbs that are said to help ease anxiety and stress—may also be beneficial for your skin. Here, the adaptogen ingredients you may want to consider using in your beauty routine.

All of a sudden, your neighborhood cafe has mushroom coffee on the menu and your facialist is recommending a cream with something called ashwagandha on the ingredient list. It may all sound a little sci-fi, but it's part of a new fad that's steeped in ancient tradition known as adaptogens. Lately, we've been seeing adaptogens pop up in more and more beauty products—but do they really work?

What are adaptogens?

An adaptogen is essentially a fancy way to describe medicinal herbs and botanical extracts used to restore balance in the body. In some cases—like mushroom coffee or the herb ashwagandha—adaptogens can be ingested; other times, they're included on the list of ingredients in beauty products.

In skincare routines, adaptogens usually act "as a 'toner' to help regulate and get the body back to its baseline," says Los Angeles dermatologist Tsippora Shainhouse, MD. When we're stressed, our adrenal glands produce hormones that help our bodies cope, says clinical nutritionist Jennie Miremadi, MS, explaining that adaptogens may support that adrenal function and help you "adapt" to stress.

Adaptogens are nothing new. This type of herbal medicine has deep roots in traditional Chinese and Ayurvedic medicine, and the term ‘adaptogen’ was originally established by Russian pharmacist N. V. Lazarev in 1947.

So, why is everyone talking about adaptogens now? In this case, it seems that what’s old is new. “We live in a society where people are living with a great deal of stress and are looking for ways to manage that stress,” says Miremadi.

Do adaptogens really work? In one 2010 review of pharmacological studies, authors noted evidence that adaptogens had positive effects on stress and improved attention and endurance in situations where performance was hindered by fatigue or weakness. There is also some evidence that adaptogens have a positive impact on the quality of life in elderly patients and those suffering from chronic illness.

But more research is still needed. “It’s unclear if [adaptogens] do anything besides act as antioxidants,” says **Ava Shamban, MD**, a Beverly Hills dermatologist and founder of SKIN FIVE. “The claims are vague.”

Are there any risks?

“Adaptogens are, by definition, non-toxic and non-harmful,” says Tess Mauricio, MD, a Beverly Hills dermatologist and CEO of MBeautyClinic.com, but adds that it’s still a good idea to speak to your doctor before trying them. “There can be a theoretical issue with dosage and interaction with other medications, so if one takes prescription medications, or have medical issues, consult your doctor first.”

And, as is the case with many topical products, there is also some risk of irritation or contact dermatitis, says Dr. Shambam.

As a general rule of thumb, Miremadi says it’s best to consult with your healthcare provider before taking adaptogen supplements, and women who are pregnant or breastfeeding should avoid them.

How to use adaptogens

Still, proponents stand by the purported benefits: “In dermatology, we see that stress can have a significant negative impact on skin health,” says Dr. Shainhouse. “Stress can increase inflammation in the body and skin, interfere with wound healing, trigger premature skin aging, and lead to an imbalance of hormones that affect skin homeostasis.”

If you want to try adaptogens, Dr. Shainhouse suggests looking for products that contain the following:

Ashwagandha: “Ashwagandha, a strong antioxidant, has a calming effect on the adrenal glands, which, in turn can help regulate cortisol production. It may help prevent stress-related acne flares in weeks,” says Dr. Shainhouse. “It can even be used as topical poultice to help shrink new acne lesions.”

Rhodiola rosea: This Arctic herb may help minimize stress-induced flares of autoimmune inflammatory skin conditions, like psoriasis and atopic dermatitis, says Dr. Shainhouse. “Rhodiola has also been found to support new collagen and elastin production, which can slow the appearance of skin aging.”

Moringa and marshmallow root: "Stress has been shown to impair the skin barrier, leaving it prone to water loss and dehydration," notes Dr. Shainhouse. "Moringa and marshmallow root may help to repair the skin barrier and increase skin hydration."

Ready to give adaptogens a try? Below, some products that promise to restore your sense of zen and improve your skin.

2 Själ Mineral Källa Energy Tonic

Made with Arctic root and Siberian ginseng, this hydrating spritz provides anti-stress and anti-inflammation properties. Use it as a primer after cleansing to create a barrier for your skin.

available at [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) \$75

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3 REN Evercalm Ultra Comforting Rescue Mask

Swap your favorite sheet mask for this soothing and nourishing 10-minute mask. Mushroom extract reduces redness, irritation, itchiness, and inflammation to leave skin supple and smooth.

available at [sephora.com](https://www.sephora.com) \$38

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