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Are 10-Step Skin Care Routines Really Worth It? Dermatologists Weigh In.

By Julia Bruculieri | January 29, 2019

After Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez shared her lengthy skin care regimen on Instagram, we wanted to know: Is it all worth it?



The skin care industry has led us to believe that there’s a product (or more likely, an elaborate system comprising multiple products) out there for any skin concern. Looking to prevent wrinkles? There’s a cream for that. Want to get rid of dark spots? Try a serum. And what about those huge pores? Maybe a charcoal clay face mask can help.

Every day, it seems like there’s a new concoction out there promising to make our skin as smooth, poreless and plump as a baby’s bottom. And at a time when our politicians — yes, we’re talking about Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.) — are sharing skin care secrets, and other skin care-obsessed influencers are boasting about their well-stocked beauty cabinets or sharing extensive Google docs of their favorite products, it’s easy to convince ourselves that more is more, and more is better, especially on the path to “perfect” skin.

As a result of this type of thinking, we build elaborate, often lengthy skin care routines, layering product after product on our faces in hopes of obtaining picture-perfect skin, without the Instagram filters.

But are all those products really helping us? Do we really *need* to be spending all that money and piling a ton of stuff on our faces to keep our skin at its best? We spoke to dermatologists to get some answers.



There's a difference between necessity and desire.

It's true that plenty of people out there really *do* love their skin care routines. As Dr. Jennifer Chwalek, a board-certified dermatologist at Union Square Laser Dermatology in New York City, told HuffPost, "I think part of this whole trend of wanting to do multi-step skin care comes from a real need or desire in our society to do more self-care."

And we're all for self-care. So, if you're one of those folks who swears by their 10-step skin care routine, we're not here to stop you. But those who find skin care exhausting can find relief in the fact that a lengthy, elaborate skin care routine isn't necessarily, well, *necessary* for healthy skin.

"Need is a relative term," **Dr. Anna Guanche**, a board-certified dermatologist and celebrity beauty expert, told HuffPost via email. She explained that if someone has, say, a 10-step process, that would be "optimal if all ingredients are compatible, stay active on the skin when layered, penetrate, and most importantly, are applied consistently."

Therein lies one problem: compatibility. There's a good chance most people aren't scientists who've studied every ingredient in every formula and know exactly how all their products interact with each other. (There is some knowledge out there about which products should and shouldn't be used together, but with so many product choices, it's not always so simple.)

Chwalek noted that skin care and beauty products are studied for their efficacy on an individual basis, not as part of a layered routine. When you put multiple layers of products on your skin, you can't always be sure the active ingredients in each of them are penetrating as deeply as they should be for the results you want, she said.

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"Not only that, you're also adding on top of something where there are other ingredients that could be deactivating the active ingredient, or affecting the pH at which the active ingredient works," Chwalek said. "It's hard to know if the active ingredient of the last thing you added actually got [to where it needed] to be in the skin, and if it wasn't deactivated by something else you put on."

Chwalek and Guanche both agreed that doing too much to our skin can actually irritate it. And if you're using so many products, it becomes difficult to pinpoint which one or which ingredient is causing that reaction.

If you *do* have a large arsenal of products you like using, Dr. Angela Lamb, director of the Westside Mount Sinai Dermatology Faculty Practice in New York City, suggested alternating them.

"For example," she said, "if you have two cleansers you love, use one in the morning and one at night. If you have two anti-aging serums, use one in the morning and one at night, or one Monday, Wednesday, Friday and another Tuesday, Sunday."

Quality is more important than quantity.

In Guanche's opinion, a few high-quality products and consistent application are key when it comes to skin care. Lamb agreed, noting that she likes to walk through exactly which products her patients are using and why.

"I try to pin down their goals for each product," Lamb said. "Once I get my arms around that, then I can really trim down their regimens."

Chwalek offered a similar viewpoint, saying that each product should have a purpose.

"Each time you're putting something on your face, you have to ask yourself, why are you doing it? What is its purpose? If you're using a bunch of stuff and you can't say why you're doing it or what it's doing for you, I think you have to rethink it."



As it turns out, it's possible for a good skin care routine to be composed of only two or three basic products.

According to Guanche, cleansing is an absolute must and shouldn't be skipped, as "leaving a residue of makeup on the skin can cause inflammation and premature aging."

Sunscreen, she said, is another step that shouldn't be skipped, "as premature aging occurs from daily UV exposure," and lastly, she said moisturizer is important for maintaining "an overall healthy, hydrated look."

Some people might not even need moisturizers, Chwalek said, especially those who find that their skin naturally produces more oil. In her opinion, not every single person should be using the exact same products — "it needs to be individualized," she said — but her typical recommendations include a gentle cleanser, a vitamin C or antioxidant serum in the morning and sunscreen.

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- DR. JENNIFER CHWALEK

Lamb's essentials were similar: cleanser twice a day (once for those with drier skin), serum, eye cream, moisturizer and sunscreen. She did note, however, that some products, like combo moisturizers with SPF, can simplify things even more.

All three dermatologists are in agreement that toner is one product that's not necessary for everyone. Chwalek noted it could be beneficial for those with oily skin, and Guanche suggested it for acne-prone individuals.

In general, though, Lamb said that in her experience, toners "strip oils from the skin and add an extra step after cleansing that does not really help and may harm."

The reality with skin care, Chwalek said, is that we're all "wowed by marketing and there's new products coming out every day."

"It's such a huge industry. I understand the desire for people to want to use multiple things, but I do think keeping it simple is best," she said.

For the record, good skin care doesn't have to be super expensive, either.

If you've ever stepped foot inside a Sephora or spent time browsing the beauty counters at major department stores, you'll know that skin care products don't always come cheap. But according to Guanche, Chwalek and Lamb, you don't need to spend an arm and a leg on good skin care.

"There are some gentle cleansers from the drug store which have been on the market for years for a good reason. They have a cult following. Retail they run about \$10 or so," Guanche said, noting that sunscreens also don't need to be super costly.

"The best sunscreen is the one you will apply every single day," she stressed.

Some products, however, will generally cost more as they contain more expensive active ingredients, like antioxidants/vitamin C or retinols, Chwalek and Lamb agreed. However, Lamb noted that just because a product is expensive, it doesn't always mean it's better.

"I generally say that cleansers and sunscreens do not have to break the bank and you can get very affordable ones. You can also get some very basic moisturizers that are high-quality, but not at a high price point," Lamb said. "But for more 'mature' skin where you are really looking for the anti-aging ingredients, they tend to cost more for good reason."

Ultimately, "the best skin care is the skin care you actually use," Guanche said. And in this case, that doesn't always mean more.

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