

SKIN CONCERN AND ACTIVE INGREDIENTS

The two ingredients that can be seen in a skin care product are Active and Inactive ingredients.

Active ingredients are the powerhouse ingredients in your skincare products that actually do the work. They're usually botanical extracts or chemicals that target specific skin concerns.

In a nutshell, active ingredients are designed to take direct action on the skin. This could be anything from exfoliating dead skin cells, to brightening the complexion, to fighting acne.

Inactive ingredients, on the other hand, are there to support the active ingredients and help them work more effectively and allow them to better penetrate the skin. ⁽¹⁾

In simple words it means "the chemical or molecule in that product that is doing what the product says it's supposed to do"⁽²⁾

FORMS OF AVAILABLE ACTIVES:

Active ingredients can be seen in both drugs and over-the-counter products.

A product that is claimed to actually change the structure of your skin (like some antiaging products) or treat the symptoms of a condition (like eczema, psoriasis, or rosacea) is usually considered a drug by the FDA.

Some ingredients, like salicylic acid, are almost always treated as drugs, which means they have to be made according to a specific formula and called out on the product label in a very specific way, including the concentration and the ingredient's purpose.

so, a product might say it can "reduce the appearance of" skin concerns such as wrinkles or redness or otherwise make them "less noticeable"—without specifically saying it treats the underlying condition associated with those issues. In these cases, the FDA treats them like cosmetics rather than drugs.⁽³⁾

COMMON ACTIVE INGREDIENTS IN SKIN CARE:

1. **Alpha hydroxy acids:** Also called AHAs, alpha hydroxy acids are common in anti-aging products, such as those for treating fine lines and wrinkles, hyperpigmentation, and age spots (dark spots). Sun sensitivity is a side effect of AHAs, so you may want to add an SPF greater than 45 to your skin care routine if you're using products with AHAs. [Glycolic acid](#), an exfoliating agent, and lactic acid are examples of AHAs.
2. **Benzoyl peroxide:** Common in cleansers aimed at fighting acne, benzoyl peroxide sometimes requires a prescription; other times, the products are available over the counter. [Benzoyl peroxide](#) is drying and can irritate, so it's important to hydrate the skin often, moisturizing after using benzoyl peroxide.
3. **Beta hydroxy acids:** Salicylic acid is a common beta hydroxy acid, or BHA. People use [salicylic acid](#) to prevent or clear up blemishes, breakouts, and blackheads, and to even out skin tone.
4. **Ceramides:** A collection of waxy lipids, or fatty acids that are naturally occurring in the skin, ceramides can improve the skin barrier through hydration. Ceramides bind skin cells together to create a strong barrier against damage. Shampoos, deodorants, and some makeup might contain ceramides.
5. **Hyaluronic acid:** The substance hyaluronic acid occurs naturally in the human body, with the highest concentrations in young skin, joint fluids, and other healthy tissues. Over time, hyaluronic acid levels in the body deteriorate. Skin care products that contain hyaluronic acid aim to replenish the depleted levels. Typically, you use [hyaluronic acid](#) products in conjunction with a vitamin C product, such as a vitamin C serum.
6. **Hydroquinone:** Skin care products with an active ingredient of hydroquinone are bleaching or lightening agents. People use such products to lighten hyperpigmentation (melasma) as it relates to hormonal changes or pregnancy. Sun sensitivity is a side effect, so you should use a hydroquinone product with sunscreen to prevent sun damage.
7. **L-ascorbic acid:** The only form of vitamin C that is safe for use in skin care products, L-ascorbic acid can stimulate collagen production, possibly leading to a reduction in fine lines, wrinkles, and scars. People use these types of products as skin brightening agents or to protect against free radicals. First-time use might cause stinging or redness

8. **Niacinamide:** One part of the vitamin B3 molecule, niacinamide is an ingredient with the purported ability to adapt its effects to different skin cells, making it an option for all skin types, even sensitive skin. This active ingredient occurs naturally in many foods, including fish and grains. It's frequently an oral supplement, but it tends to be stronger in topical applications, like serums or moisturizers. People use [niacinamide](#) to hydrate the skin and even skin tone, among other reasons.
9. **Retinoids:** Retinol, retinal aldehyde, and retinyl esters are all types of retinoids that derive from vitamin A and are common ingredients in skin care products. People use [retinoid](#) products to decrease the appearance of fine lines and wrinkles, improve uneven skin tone and pigmentation, and hydrate the skin to prevent dryness.⁽⁴⁾

THERE ARE A FEW MAIN CATEGORIES OF ACTIVE-CONTAINING PRODUCTS:

These are the most common types of topical actives you'll come across that address specific skin issues:

- **Signs of aging:** SPF-boosting ingredients (e.g. zinc oxide, titanium dioxide, avobenzone, oxybenzone), [vitamin A/retinoids](#), [vitamin C](#), [vitamin E](#).
- **Dryness:** hyaluronic acid, vitamin E.
- **Pigmentation issues:** kojic acid, AHAs, BHA, hydroquinone, vitamin C.
- **Acne:** vitamin A/retinoids, salicylic acid, benzoyl peroxide, azelaic acid.
- **Rosacea:** various antibiotics, azelaic acid, sulfur.
- **Psoriasis:** steroids, vitamin A/retinoids, vitamin D, salicylic acid, urea, lactic acid, anthralin, tacrolimus, pimecrolimus.
- **Eczema:** steroids, tacrolimus, pimecrolimus.⁽³⁾

References:

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2. John G. Zampella, M.D., assistant professor in the Ronald O. Perelman department of dermatology at NYU Langone Health.
3. What exactly are actives in skin care products – Sarah Jacoby, March 8, 2019.
4. Common active ingredients in skin care – Masterclass articles, Oct 20, 2021.

