

# How to Use Topical Retinoids

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## Overview

Topical retinoids are available in many over the counter skin care products as well as prescription strength medications. They work to treat a variety of skin care problems ranging from fine lines and wrinkles to acne breakouts. Talk to your dermatologist about whether topical retinoids might be right for you.



## What are Retinoids?

Derived from vitamin A, retinoids are a family of chemical substances that are commonly prescribed by dermatologists.

The first retinoid developed for use on the skin was tretinoin—it was approved by the U.S. Food & Drug Administration as a topical acne treatment that worked by diminishing the clogging of pores and providing an anti-inflammatory effect.

Since then, there have been many more vitamin A-derived products and topical retinoids that have become available- both as over the counter products and also as prescription strength medications. The application of topical retinoids has expanded

beyond just acne treatment. Today, topical retinoids are used for treatment of a wide range of skin conditions.

### **What are the Uses of Topical Retinoids?**

Topical retinoids can be used to treat:

- Acne
- Psoriasis
- Fine lines and wrinkles
- Discoloration
- Sun damage and pre-cancers called actinic keratoses

### **Common Side Effects of Topical Retinoid Therapy:**

Commonly reported side effects of using topical retinoid therapy include:

- Dryness, scaling, or peeling
- Redness of the skin
- Irritation
- Burning, itching, or stinging
- Sun sensitivity

### **How to Use Your Topical Retinoid:**

- Topical retinoids are typically applied at bedtime and not in the morning.
- Before applying your topical retinoid, wash your skin with a mild soap or cleanser and pat dry. To minimize irritation, wait until your skin is completely dry (15-20 minutes) before applying your topical retinoid.
- Apply a very thin coat of the topical retinoid to the treatment area. Typically, a

dermatologist recommends applying a pea sized amount for the entire face. Do not apply to the eyelid skin.

- As the medication can be irritating and drying, apply every 2nd or 3rd night to start, increasing to nightly application only as tolerated.
- To help minimize dryness and irritation, you can apply a moisturizer on top of the topical retinoid. Ask your dermatologist for moisturizer recommendations.
- As the medication causes sun sensitivity, diligent sun protection and sunscreen use is recommended. Use a broad spectrum sunscreen daily, SPF 30 or higher. Your dermatologist can provide recommendations for sunscreens.
- If you should experience redness and irritation, discontinue using the topical retinoid but continue moisturizing until your skin returns to normal. Once your skin returns to normal, you can re-start your topical retinoid- applying every 2nd or 3rd night to start and gradually working up to nightly application.
- Generally, topical retinoid use should be discontinued for a period of time before waxing or other cosmetic treatments such as chemical peels, microdermabrasion, or laser therapy. Discuss with your doctor or skin care specialist before pursuing any cosmetic treatments.
- Do not use topical retinoids if you are pregnant or actively trying to conceive.