



BEAUTY

Are your anti-acne and anti-ageing skincare products actually damaging your skin?

BY VASUDHA RAI
27 NOVEMBER 2019

Contrary to what you may believe, maintaining a bacterial balance on your face is key to fighting off acne, and keeping it at bay



Until very recently, antibiotics were considered the gold standard to get rid of [acne](#). Dermatologists and beauty brands recommended products with antibacterial ingredients that swept away the face bacteria, because we believed they were all bad. “Originally, all of us used to do this. The routine was topical antibiotics every morning and evening,” says Dr Kiran Kaur Sethi, Columbia-educated integrative skin, aesthetic and wellness expert, and founder Isya Aesthetics, Delhi. The idea was to kill the *P. Acnes* bacteria, which was mainly responsible for acne. “Obstruction ([blackheads](#), [whiteheads](#), etc) caused [a growth of this] bacteria [in the area], which led to inflammation and eventually resulted in pimples,” explains Dr Sethi.

In addition, dermatologists regularly prescribed oral antibiotics to reduce bacteria and inflammation. “Luckily, we gave them in low doses, so they weren’t as bad as topical antibacterial creams,” says Dr Sethi. She explains that creams kill multiple bacteria at the same time—both good and bad. “And when the good bacteria is eradicated, the bad bacteria begins to grow more profusely.” This is why we get a second (more severe) bout of acne as soon as we get off the antibiotics. “Even our habits don’t support good bacteria, whether it’s our food habits or skincare routine. Plus bad bacteria colonises easily, which prevents the good ones from coming back,” she adds.

It’s not surprising then that new data recommends avoiding topical antibiotics entirely—“unless the acne is severe and needs a quick response,” says Dr Sethi. For her, not using topical antibiotics means that there is a lesser chance of recurrence. “The presence of good bacteria on the skin makes it healthier, calmer, with less [rosacea](#), and prevents [acne](#) and [eczema](#).” Having said that, the elimination the skin’s microflora doesn’t happen in the doctor’s office alone. As we use harsh products on the skin in the daily pursuit of perfection, we are replacing the good with the bad. Extensive [exfoliation](#), using acidic ingredients on the skin, over-cleansing and certain OTC anti-acne creams wreak havoc on your natural microflora.

For many of us, the obvious choice seems to be a clean, green product because they're all gentle and don't strip the skin, right? Wrong. Paayal Mahajan, founder of the green skincare line, Essential Body Couture, says that we can go wrong with [clean beauty](#) too. "Anything that's overly acidic will damage the microbiome," says Mahajan. "In the natural space, people use a lot of irresponsible ingredients such as lemon essential oil." She explains that an ingredient such as this is supremely acidic and causes photosensitivity, which results in the skin getting inflamed.

Still, it's easy to keep the skin balanced and yet, clear and acne-free. You can exfoliate and get rid of acne despite being gentle in your skincare routine.

The experts recommend these four tips to build a good bacteria-friendly skincare routine:

1) Don't over-cleanse

"Your natural oil is extremely healthy—it creates the environment for the good bacteria to exist," says Dr Sethi. "Your goal shouldn't be to feel super dry after cleansing, because the acne isn't really [caused due to] the oil but from everything else." Mahajan recommends using [cold-pressed oils](#) in place of your regular cleanser, as they clean deeply without disturbing the natural pH of the skin. "Something like a coconut oil may not suit everyone, however jojoba or sweet almond oils are light and can work for even the most acne-prone skin types," she says. She suggests massaging your face with oil and then using a hot, steaming washcloth to wipe it off completely. If needed, mop up the remains with a [micellar water](#) that's meant for [sensitive skin](#). Mahajan also experiments with homemade cleansers, such as a paste of moringa powder mixed with drinking water. "I just apply it for a few minutes before I wash it off," she says.

2) Use anti-inflammatory ingredients

Dr Sethi suggests a combination of turmeric, aloe and boswellia to pacify the skin. Mahajan is a huge fan of manuka honey to bring back the skin's balance. "This honey is really potent—full of antioxidants and rich in enzymes—and balances the pH of the skin." Manuka honey is also known for its powerful ability to get rid of acne-causing bacteria. If you can't find manuka honey, then any locally-sourced, raw, organic honey will do. Many people use [honey](#) as a cleanser for the skin. Mahajan also recommends looking for products with essential oils such as German chamomile in their ingredients to really calm the skin.

3) Exfoliate with care

"Acids aren't bad for the good bacteria, but if you use them to a point where they irritate the skin, they are harmful," says Dr Sethi. But if you must use your acid face cleanser, Mahajan recommends doing it only once every day, preferably at night. Try to balance the stripping action of the acid with a good face oil or a moisturiser as well.

4) Support your skin with food

"Your skin is a reflection of your inner health, so you have to eat foods that nourish the gut," says Mahajan. Instead of just popping probiotics, Dr Sethi suggests consuming prebiotic foods such as onions, garlic, leeks, asparagus, artichokes and beans. These are basically food for the good bacteria in your gut. You can also add anti-inflammatory ingredients to your diet—the same turmeric that works to calm your skin topically, can also heal it from within. Other anti-inflammatories include Omega-3, green tea and matcha tea, herbs such as tulsi, spirulina and moringa, and Vitamin D.

Vasudha Rai has been writing on beauty and wellness for more than 15 years. She's the author of Glow: Indian Foods, Recipes and Rituals for Beauty Inside and Out, and blogs regularly on [Vbeauty.co](#)