



TOPICAL RETINOIDS

DEFINITION

Retinoids are creams, lotions, and gels that are derivatives of the vitamin A molecule (retinol). This group of medicines is the most important topical product in the treatment of acne. These products work as a hormone on the skin that improves acne by promoting rapid shedding of dead cells of the skin and reducing inflammation. The rapid shedding of dead cells serves to unblock pores, prevent and clear blackheads and whiteheads, and speed rejuvenation of the skin. Retinoids have also been used to slow and reduce aging of skin caused by too much sunlight, and may slow and prevent the occurrence of skin cancer. Through their peeling action, they may erase minor wrinkles caused by the sun and lessen the severity of minor acne scars. This class of medicines should not be used by pregnant women, since they may cause birth defects. Medicines in this category include Tretinoin, Retin-A Micro, Differin, Tazorac, Renova, Atralin, and others.

USING TOPICAL RETINOIDS FOR ACNE

Retinoids should be applied only once daily in the evening to a clean, dry face. After washing, allowing your face to dry and “rest” for 20-30 minutes before applying medicine can lessen your risk of irritation. Use just enough to cover the skin very lightly, about the size of a pea for the entire face. Spread it over the affected area and gently massage it into the skin until it disappears. **These medicines are NOT spot treatment to be applied to individual pimples;** they should be applied to the entire face to help reduce existing blemishes and prevent the formation of new pimples. **DO NOT USE MORE THAN IS RECOMMENDED.** This will only cause more irritation, redness, and drying of the skin and will not give you faster results. The drug must be used sparingly, especially at first. Fair skinned people may not be able to use it more than once every two to three days initially. The longer you use your retinoid, the better you should be able to tolerate it and the less redness and irritation you should have. Frequency of use can be gradually increased until you are using it every night.

Retinoids may initially irritate the skin. You may experience stinging or the feeling of warmth with application. In a few patients, acne may appear to get worse during the first 2-6 weeks of therapy as the medicine may bring hidden pimples to the surface on their way to clearing. You will get dry and may even appear to have a mild sunburn. This is not a reason to discontinue therapy as it usually resolves over time with continued use. Allow 6 to 8 weeks to begin to achieve results from topical retinoids. Good to excellent results occur with persistent use and may take many months to become apparent.

While using topical retinoids, you should use a mild soap on your face such as Dove, Purpose, Basis, CeraVe or Cetaphil cleanser. Do not use astringents, rubbing alcohol, or scrubs on your face as these will increase irritation. Other acne medicines should be those prescribed or recommended by our office; do not use additional over the counter creams or soaps that you buy from the pharmacy. Use a moisturizer to help offset the dryness caused by your topical retinoid and other acne medicines. You should use only non-comedogenic, oil-free facial moisturizers such as Purpose, Cetaphil, Aveeno, CeraVe, or Olay.

*** It is preferred that you not use topical retinoids during pregnancy and stop immediately if you become pregnant. Retinoids have been shown to cause birth defects in laboratory animal studies.**

USING RETINOIDS FOR REPAIR OF PHOTOAGING

After many years of sun exposure, certain changes occur in the skin. Some of these changes include a wrinkled, yellow, blotchy, coarse, rough, or dry appearance. Along with the visible aging changes, precancerous and cancerous tumors may develop. The family of topical medications called retinoids can slow and partially reverse many of these changes. Current medications in this class of medications include Tretinoin, Retin A Micro, Renova, Tazorac, Differin, and Atralin. The best candidates for topical retinoid therapy are people with a long history of excessive sun exposure who have signs of early actinic damage. Light skinned individuals who tan poorly are at greatest risk of damage from photo aging and may want to start this type of therapy as early as 20 to 30 years of age. In contrast, darker skinned patients may not perceive photo aging until their late 40's or 50's. Even dark skinned patients will benefit from regular use of a topical retinoid.

This treatment is very safe; however, initially it can be irritating until your skin becomes accustomed to it. Treatment may produce some redness, scaling, or itching (similar to a sunburn), particularly prominent during the first month or so. Sometimes, we may start a patient on a lower strength or less frequent application of retinoid and increase as tolerated. It is applied once daily at bedtime to a clean dry face. After washing, allowing your face to dry and "rest" for 20-30 minutes before applying medicine can lessen your risk of irritation. An amount equal to the size of a small pea will cover the entire face. More or less will not harm you, but heavy applications will cause more skin irritation. If there is a marked amount of dryness or irritation, it is acceptable to occasionally skip an application. In addition to the use of the retinoid, it is important to use a daily moisturizer with sunblock (SPF 30 or higher). Wash gently with mild soap such as Dove, Purpose, Cetaphil, or CeraVe and use a mild moisturizer with sunscreen. Good brands of moisturizer with SPF include Cetaphil, Aveeno, Neutrogena, and others.

It is important to be aware that the anti-aging benefits of retinoids are slow and may not be apparent for months. Patients with severe sun damage may notice red spots several weeks after starting treatment. These are precancerous actinic keratoses which are brought to the surface by these medications. The medicine does not cause new actinic keratoses, but unmasks the existing lesions in some patients. These spots may clear spontaneously or may need in-office treatment with liquid nitrogen. Because retinoids cause the skin to have a thinner scaly layer (and therefore, less wrinkles), you may experience slightly increased sun sensitivity. Also, because the aging process of the skin grinds on, treatment with this medication should continue indefinitely. This is a safe medication. There is no harm to starting, stopping, or skipping doses. However, the more regular the use of these medications, the better results you will see.

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