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Clean Beauty 101: A Comprehensive Guide

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Last Updated: January 29, 2021



A clean beauty routine involves products that contain certain ingredients and don't contain others. Alice Potter/Getty Images

If you've hopped on social media at all in the last couple of years, you may have noticed the push to green your beauty routine. It's a movement toward "clean beauty," but the definition is less straightforward than you may think.

What Is 'Clean' Beauty, Anyway?

It all depends on whom you ask. "The definition of 'clean beauty' is pretty nebulous," says Michele Farber, MD (<https://www.schweigerderm.com/providers/michele-farber-md/>), a board-certified dermatologist with Schweiger Dermatology Group in Philadelphia. There are no strict guidelines on what can be called clean or natural, which makes it complicated for a skin-care consumer.

RELATED: California Bans 24 Toxic Chemicals From Skin-Care Products: What to Know (<https://www.everydayhealth.com/skin-beauty/heres-everything-you-need-to-know-about-californias-toxic-free-cosmetics-act/>)

Because there's no formal guidance, it's up to you to decide what clean beauty means to you, and that will depend on what you're looking for. Clean beauty could mean:

You're actively looking to minimize certain controversial chemicals in your skin care, including fragrance, preservatives like parabens and phthalates, and dyes, all of which can be irritating for skin. But this may mean that you are still using products that contain chemicals.

You're looking to minimize your exposure to all chemicals. You might then opt for truly natural products, like using coconut oil (<https://www.everydayhealth.com/diet-nutrition/diet/coconut-oil-health-benefits-nutrition-facts-uses-more/>) as a body moisturizer.

You're "cleaner" when it comes to certain products in your routine, like cleansers and soaps, but still use conventional acne products because you find these treat your skin

RELATED: What Are 'Natural' Skin-Care Products, and Are They Actually Better for You?

(<https://www.everydayhealth.com/skin-beauty/what-are-natural-skin-care-products-are-they-better-you/>)

Is There Any Science Behind This Approach to Skin Care?

Concern is growing among consumers and professionals that many ingredients used in skin-care products may affect our health. As the Environmental Working Group (EWG) (<https://www.ewg.org/enviroblog/2009/06/ewgs-healthy-home-tip-1-choose-better-body-care-products>) points out, people use about 10 personal-care products a day, amounting to 126 different ingredients.

EWG, an organization that funds research and advocates for more transparency for personal-care products, argues that most of the ingredients the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) allows in these items have not been proved safe. They also note that more than 500 products available in the United States “contain ingredients banned from cosmetics in Japan, Canada, or the European Union.” There’s the concern that some of these may be carcinogenic or endocrine-disrupting, meaning they cause cancer or dysregulate your hormonal system.

Whether those claims are true remains unclear, though. “We live in an environment where there are tons of chemicals everywhere, and it’s impossible to live a chemical-free life. Though I think it’s good to try to limit the number of chemicals we’re exposed to, with certain skin conditions, it’s not always possible,” says Rebecca Baxt, MD (<https://www.cosmedical.com/about-us/doctors/dermatologists/rebecca-baxt-md-mba-faad/>), a board-certified dermatologist in Paramus, New Jersey. For instance, if you like to moisturize with plain coconut oil (</diet-nutrition/diet/coconut-oil-health-benefits-nutrition-facts-uses-more/>), that’s fine — but if you’re acne-prone (<https://www.everydayhealth.com/skin-beauty/acne/10-surprising-causes-acne-adults/>), you shouldn’t put this on your face.

Work with your dermatologist here. They can help you find the products and routine that will address your clean beauty preferences while working toward your treatment goals, says Dr. Farber.

RELATED: 11 Common Acne Treatments, Explained

(<https://www.everydayhealth.com/hs/adult-acne/acne-treatments/>)

Advantages of a Clean Skin-Care Routine

If you're using products that are free of the most common ingredients that cause skin to react — think fragrances, dyes, parabens, and phthalates — it may help your skin remain calmer, and you may experience fewer symptoms of irritation, like redness, burning, and flaking.

Disadvantages of a Clean Skin-Care Routine

This is something that dermatologists everywhere will warn you about: “Just because something is organic or natural doesn't mean it's good. It doesn't mean it's bad, either,” says Dr. Baxt. “Organics still have a ton of ingredients, and I find they use a lot of scented oils, which people are often allergic to,” she says. In short, you're not guaranteed happy, irritation-free skin just because you're using something labeled as natural or clean.

Also, it's entirely possible to take these efforts too far. Never make your own sunscreen (<https://www.everydayhealth.com/skin-beauty/sunscreen-glossary-decoding-every-spf-term-you-need-know/>), for example. The sunscreen you buy should be broad-spectrum, SPF 30 or higher, and water resistant, says the American Academy of Dermatology (<https://www.aad.org/public/spot-skin-cancer/learn-about-skin-cancer/prevent/how-to-select-a-sunscreen>).

RELATED: 10 Sun-Care Products That Dermatologists Love

(<https://www.everydayhealth.com/skin-beauty/sun-care-products-dermatologists-love/>)

Ingredients to Use (and Ones to Avoid) in a Clean Skin-Care Routine

In general, this approach to personal care is about finding products *without* certain ingredients. More on that below, but these unwanted contents generally include fragrance, dyes, preservatives, parabens, and phthalates.

You may want to seek out the following, commonly present in “clean” beauty products:

Hyaluronic acid (<https://www.everydayhealth.com/skin-beauty/hyaluronic-acid-definition-benefits-and-the-best-serums/>), glycerin, panthenol, ceramides (moisturizers)

Zinc oxide (</drugs/zinc-oxide-topical>) and titanium dioxide (found in mineral-based sunscreens)

Vitamin C (<https://www.everydayhealth.com/diet-nutrition/vitamin-c/>) (a protective antioxidant) (<https://www.everydayhealth.com/diet-nutrition/diet/antioxidants-health-benefits-best-sources-side-effects-more/>)

Alpha hydroxy acids (<https://www.everydayhealth.com/skin-beauty/a-comprehensive-guide-to-using-acids-in-your-skin-care-routine/>) (glycolic acid for evening skin tone)

Beta hydroxy acids (salicylic acid for acne)

Bakuchiol (a retinol (<https://www.everydayhealth.com/smart-skin/new-to-retinol-a-complete-guide-on-the-skin-care-ingredient/>) alternative, used to address fine lines and wrinkles (<https://www.everydayhealth.com/skin-beauty/ways-to-reduce-fine-lines-and-wrinkles-without-getting-botox/>))

If you're looking to find out if one of your favorite products might be “clean,” look it up at the EWG's Skin Deep Database (<https://www.ewg.org/skindeep/search.php>).

RELATED: 10 Things Your Skin Is Trying to Tell You — and How to Respond

(<https://www.everydayhealth.com/skin-beauty/treatment/scientific-fixes-common-skincare-problems/>)

Ingredients to Avoid

This is up to you, but for reference, Sephora (<https://www.sephora.com/beauty/clean-beauty-products>) does have a standard for what it considers “clean.” For ease of purchase, the personal-care company, which has brick-and-mortar stores and an online shop, awards products that meet its standards with a seal and has a separate section on their website

where you can shop clean beauty. These products do not contain “parabens, sulfates SLS and SLES, phthalates, mineral oils, formaldehydes, formaldehyde-releasing agents, retinyl palmitate, oxybenzone, coal tar, hydroquinone, triclosan, and triclocarban.”

Though it's not an official guideline, it can be a good place to start if you're not sure where to begin your clean beauty routine.

RELATED: The Skin-Care Glossary Every Woman Needs to Have

(<https://www.everydayhealth.com/skin-beauty/beauty-skincare-glossary-you-need/>)

Clean Skin Care Product Staples and Recommendations

Cleanse with micellar water. Try Simple Kind to Skin Micellar Cleansing Water ([https://www.simpleskincare.com/us/en/products/cleansers/kind-to-skin-micellar-cleansing-water.html?](https://www.simpleskincare.com/us/en/products/cleansers/kind-to-skin-micellar-cleansing-water.html?utm_medium=cpc&utm_source=google&utm_campaign=Always+On_CN000557_CH1183_BH099Product-Micellar+Water-EX&utm_term=micellar+water&gclid=EAlaIQobChMIgIS1-NHY5AIV_hitBh1ylwNGEAAAYASAAEgL7o_D_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds)

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Use a mineral-based SPF moisturizer and sunscreen. Minerals like titanium dioxide or zinc oxide reflect rays and are not absorbed in the skin. They are considered the “cleaner” choice, says Farber. Coola Mineral Face Matte Tint SPF 30

([https://www.sephora.com/product/mineral-face-spf-30-matte-tint-P395627?](https://www.sephora.com/product/mineral-face-spf-30-matte-tint-P395627?acid2=coola_suncareforface_us_productcarousel_ufe:p395627:product)

[acid2=coola_suncareforface_us_productcarousel_ufe:p395627:product](https://www.sephora.com/product/mineral-face-spf-30-matte-tint-P395627?acid2=coola_suncareforface_us_productcarousel_ufe:p395627:product)) has both titanium dioxide and zinc oxide for broad-spectrum protection.

RELATED: Chemical vs. Mineral Sunscreen: What's the Difference?

(<https://www.everydayhealth.com/skin-beauty/chemical-vs-mineral-sunscreen-whats-difference/>)

Protect with an antioxidant serum. Farber recommends a vitamin C serum

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(<https://www.everydayhealth.com/skin-beauty/what-are-benefits-risks-vitamin-c-serums/>), which will offer antioxidants to counteract the harmful effects of free radicals — chemicals that cause skin aging, as research shows

(<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3299230/>). Drunk Elephant is a beloved brand in the clean beauty space, and their C-Firma Vitamin C Day Serum

(<https://www.sephora.com/product/c-firma-day-serum-P400259?>

[acid2=products%20grid:p400259](https://www.sephora.com/product/c-firma-day-serum-P400259?)) contains pure L-ascorbic acid (</drugs/ascorbic-acid>) (vitamin C (</drugs/ascorbic-acid>)) and is suitable for oily, normal, and dry skin (</beauty-pictures/7-surprising-causes-of-dry-skin.aspx>).

Even tone with glycolic acid. You can find glycolic acid, an alpha hydroxy acid made from sugarcane (<https://cosmeticsinfo.org/ingredient/glycolic-acid>), in creams and serums, an ingredient that encourages the dead skin layer on top to slough off to reduce the look of discoloration, says Farber.

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(<https://www.everydayhealth.com/skin-beauty/5-reasons-maintaining-a-skin-care-routine-is-good-for-your-mental-health/>)

Treat acne with salicylic acid. Salicylic acid, which comes from the bark of the willow tree, (<https://cosmeticsinfo.org/ingredient/salicylic-acid>) is a gold standard ingredient for addressing acne issues, and it's considered okay for clean beauty. It too works by exfoliating dead skin cells that plug up pores and can lead to blemishes, according to the American Academy of Dermatology (<https://www.aad.org/public/diseases/acne/skin-care/tips>).

Smooth lines with bakuchiol. This is the newest natural retinol (</drugs/vitamin-a>) alternative. Retinol is a vitamin A (<https://www.everydayhealth.com/drugs/vitamin-a>) derivative, and this ingredient exfoliates and stimulates collagen production to keep skin smooth and wrinkle-free, as Harvard University notes

(<https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/do-retinoids-really-reduce-wrinkles>).

Bakuchiol has been found to lessen wrinkles and diminish discolorations similarly to retinol, and causes less irritation, according to a study published in February 2019 in the *British Journal of Dermatology* (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29947134>).

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Hydrate with a moisturizer. The main goal is to look for a simple moisturizer that contains as few ingredients as possible and is fragrance-free, says Farber. Common ingredients found in “clean” moisturizers include hyaluronic acid, glycerin, panthenol, and ceramides.

Morning and Night Steps to Follow in a Clean Beauty Routine

The ideal routine for everyone will look different — skin care isn't one-size-fits-all, says Farber. But one general principle, she says, is that less is more. One way to accomplish your goal of a clean beauty routine is to simply pare it down. By using fewer products, you'll reduce your exposure to a variety of ingredients and chemicals, including those that may be irritating your skin. Here are the three steps you need in the morning and evening, according to Farber.

In the Morning

- 1 Wash up, depending on your skin type.** If you're oily, then wash in the morning, says Farber. If you're dry or sensitive, a quick rinse of water is all you need.
- 2 Blot on a vitamin C serum.**
- 3 Slather on an SPF moisturizer** to safeguard skin from the sun.

RELATED: Sensitive Skin? 5 Common Beauty Mistakes to Avoid

(<https://www.everydayhealth.com/skin-beauty/sensitive-skin-common-beauty-mistakes-to-avoid/>)

In the Evening

- 1 Start with a gentle cleanser.** To wash the dirt, grime, leftover makeup, and the day's pollution from your skin.
- 2 Treat skin.** Now's the time to treat skin with your anti-acne product or a healthy-aging product like glycolic acid or bakuchiol.

3 Moisturize again. Before you go to bed (<https://www.everydayhealth.com/skin-beauty/nighttime-skin-care-mistakes-are-wrecking-your-face/>), make sure skin is well hydrated. This should be a plain, fragrance-free moisturizer; no need to apply one with SPF at night.

RELATED: Can You Sleep Your Way to Brighter, Healthier Skin?

(<https://www.everydayhealth.com/skin-beauty/can-you-sleep-your-way-healthier-brighter-skin/>)



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