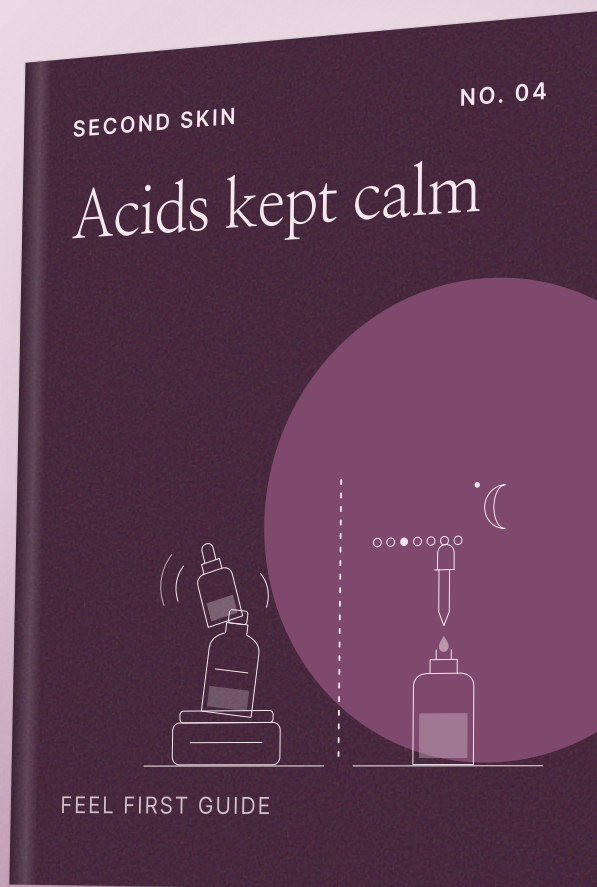




TEXTURE GUIDE · TEXTURE

Keep acids gentle while smoothing tone and clearing pores

Most acid trouble comes from stacking too much too fast. This guide translates solubility, strength and spacing into a tactile weekly rhythm you can keep on a crowded shelf.

- **One thing**
Single acid, once weekly at first, then add slowly.
- **Feel solubility**
Light water slip for surface, oil cut for pores.
- **Read tightness**
Tack, sting or shine means rest and barrier care.

By Laura Reyes · Updated Aug 11, 2026 · 9 min read

CONTENTS

01	How lotions loosen dead cells	05	Feeling strain and holding a calm weekly cadence
02	AHAs, BHAs, PHAs and LHAs explained	06	The checklist
03	Reading potency, pH and pacing with confidence	07	Sources and further reading
04	Pairings to skip and ways to space actives		

Many people smooth acids over other acids until skin feels papery and hot. Glow never gets a chance because tightness and flare arrive first. When texture, molecule size, pH and pacing are legible by touch, a bottle becomes a small evening ritual instead of a risk.

01

How lotions loosen dead cells

Skin releases spent cells daily by desquamation. That renewal eases with age, arid air and sluggish turnover, so leftover cells remain and scatter light poorly. Faces look coarse and flat, and pores seem packed because keratin plus sebum residue gathers near the opening.

Scrubs lift cells through friction. Chemical exfoliants weaken links among cells so they shed with greater evenness. Precision explains why many easily flushed faces favour the latter route. A fluid left in place or a brief rinse can be measured, spaced and halted, whereas grit keeps scouring while rubbing continues.

Acids require an acidic setting to stay in free active form. Irritation climbs with concentration at fixed pH and climbs as pH drops at fixed concentration. That pairing counts more than percentage on packaging. A modest percentage at reduced pH can bite harder than a larger percentage buffered nearer neutral, and cartons seldom disclose free acid. Tolerance differs between people, which is why exact best percent and pH for each skin type cannot be read from marketing copy.

Consultant dermatologist Dr Justine Kluk observes that exfoliating acids have grown steadily more loved by skincare fans and by anyone hoping to refine skin across the past couple of years. Her early guidance applies through the full routine: move slowly at first and let the rest of the routine stay soft and plain.

AHAs, BHAs, PHAs and LHAs explained

AHAs cover glycolic acid, lactic acid, tartaric acid, citric acid, malic acid and mandelic acid and they dissolve in water and work across the skin surface. Picture them as gardeners tending surface soil. They fit mottled tone, coarse patches and early fine surface lines where demand centres on renewal rather than pore clearance.

Dimension alters conduct inside the group. Glycolic acid owns the tiniest AHA molecule, sinks in quickest, and exfoliates hardest at matched pH and strength beside larger AHAs. Lactic acid feels bigger and kinder than glycolic acid and also behaves as a humectant that adds hydration alongside exfoliation. Mandelic acid ranks as the largest everyday AHA, with the slowest and softest action, made for easily sensitized skin and tones given to post inflammatory hyperpigmentation.

BHAs dissolve in oil, slip inside lipid rich pores, and help lift keratin plus sebum buildup that feeds congestion. Salicylic acid remains the best known BHA in skincare and is used for acne, blackheads, calluses and warts. Upper arm stratum corneum treated with 2 percent salicylic acid lifts away far more readily with tape stripping than control sites treated with vehicle alone. The anti inflammatory power of salicylic acid shows most clearly at strengths between 0.5 percent and 5 percent w/w. A note for ingredient readers: salicylic acid is called a BHA across skincare sources though one pharmacology review says Yu and Van Scott place it as a phenolic aromatic acid rather than a true beta hydroxy acid. The routine guidance remains unchanged.

PHAs cover gluconolactone, lactobionic acid and maltobionic acid and their larger frames beside AHAs mean shallower entry and slower work. LHAs spring from salicylic acid, dissolve more readily in fat than BHA, enter more slowly, and treat acne more gently in sensitive skin. Both flatter reactive skin through slower action, or anyone craving polish without a brisk opening.

A short comparison helps:

FAMILY	SOLUBILITY AND PACE	BEST SUITED FOR
AHA	Waterborne, top layer effect, tempo fixed by molecular dimension	Flat tone, bumpy feel, parched surface coarseness
BHA	Oil friendly, moves into lipid heavy pores	Slick skin, buildup, blackheads, spot prone zones
PHA	Bulky structure, unhurried surface effect	Easily ruffled skin, debut acid, dry faces seeking soft renewal
LHA	Salicylic rooted, greater fat affinity, gradual entry	Buildup in reactive skin, tender acne care

Acid sounding names do not always mean exfoliants. Hyaluronic acid hydrates without exfoliating, tranexamic acid acts on pigment signaling, and azelaic acid soothes visible redness by another route.

FROM THE EDITORS

Suitability is not the same as strength. A compact molecule travels quicker and reduced pH liberates greater acid, so softness arises from dimension, base and cadence rather than from a plant name or a low number alone.

03

Reading potency, pH and pacing with confidence

Strength order starts with molecule size. Inside AHAs, glycolic leads, lactic rests mid pack with added humectant softness, and mandelic closes with a slow hand. With salicylic acid, formula pH molds the outcome. Salicylic acid carries a pKa of 2.98 and formulas with pH near the pKa deliver markedly more exfoliation than formulas with pH well above the pKa. So a higher percent does not always mean stronger. Free acid turns on pH, base, contact time, and skin itself.

AHAs can raise sun sensitivity while in use and for up to a week after stopping, per FDA guidance on labeling cosmetics that contain AHAs. A dermatology led acid guide suggests easing acid exfoliants in gradually at 2 to 3 times per week with broad spectrum SPF 30 or higher during AHA or BHA use. Night flatters AHAs, morning insists on sunscreen always. Salicylic acid feels like it offers some sun protective softness, yet daily SPF still belongs with AHA and BHA because fresh exfoliation can briefly heighten UV sensitivity. Daily SPF covers both views.

Start light on opening frequency and adjust by how your skin feels. Acid exfoliation belongs at most two to three times per week, and once or twice per week for sensitive skin. One esthetician guide maps it by feel across the week with two to three times per week for oily skin, once or twice per week for normal or combination skin, and once per week or every two weeks for dry or sensitive skin. A brand safe use guide suggests opening AHAs and BHAs at 1 to 2 times per week and layering up over several weeks, while PHAs may open at 3 to 4 times per week since they feel gentler. No clear timeline says how fast anyone may safely raise frequency without barrier strain, so keep each stage for two to three weeks.

Patch test first. Dab a little behind the ear or along the jaw, then allow a full day. Light tingling for a minute or two may feel normal with a fresh acid. Burning, widening redness, itching, or swelling is not normal. Rinse, pare back, and shelve that formula.

04

Pairings to skip and ways to space actives

Retinoids and acids both exfoliate and should stay apart at first, and strong AHAs should skip the same night as retinol until skin has adjusted. Even once adjusted, many skins prefer the pair kept separate. Trade nights or hold acids to one or two fixed evenings and retinoid to other evenings, with rest nights in between.

Vitamin C belongs in the morning beside SPF with acids held for night because exfoliants drop pH and may unsettle vitamin C and raise irritation risk. The split also honors sun habits. Antioxidant plus SPF by day backs daytime defense, acid by night backs renewal as skin rests.

Benzoyl peroxide may weaken retinol when layered together and heighten dryness, so separate nights are advised if both stay in play. Niacinamide needs context. Niacinamide is said to mix well with many ingredients yet is also flagged as possibly too brisk with exfoliating acids in sensitive skin, so setting and strength count. When skin feels sturdy, a plain niacinamide moisturizer on acid nights may feel pleasant. Save niacinamide for quiet nights when skin feels fragile and notice any flush or sting.

Let everything else stay plain while acids find their place. Soft cleanser, simple moisturizer, and SPF mean fewer unknowns. No single combo product can be judged right for a routine without the full formula in view, so introduce one active at a time.

05

Feeling strain and holding a calm weekly cadence

Over exfoliation clues include irritation, redness, peeling, new sensitivity to other products, tightness, dryness, and a glassy yet not oily look. Barrier strain clues include lasting dryness and tightness, redness, sting or burn on application, flaking and rough feel, plus breakouts

mixed with dryness and sensitivity. A sudden flinch at a trusted moisturizer usually speaks first. Skin can read polished from afar yet feel thin and thirsty to the touch.

Pause every exfoliating acid and retinoid once those signs show. Return to soft cleanser, moisturizer, and broad spectrum SPF. Set aside fragrance, potent vitamin C, and benzoyl peroxide until calm settles. No fixed clock predicts barrier recovery for each person after over exfoliation, so wait until tightness, sting, and flaking have eased for several days before retesting one acid at half the old frequency. Ask for professional care with swelling, crusting, spreading rash, pain, or breakouts that deepen after pausing.

A calm week keeps to a single acid. Acid cleansers wash off quickly and flatter oily skin in brief contact. Toners, pads, and serums linger longer and serve focused work. Pick one texture, not a stack.

For dry or sensitive skin, try PHA or mandelic or lactic once weekly at night. Cleanse softly, smooth on a sheer layer, moisturize richly, and wear SPF daily. Hold for three weeks. Rise to twice weekly only when mornings feel supple and settled.

For normal or combination skin, try lactic or a soft glycolic or salicylic once or twice weekly at night, on chosen nights. Let the other nights stay clear of retinoid and benzoyl peroxide for calm skin and an easy shelf. When pores across nose and chin stay clogged while cheeks feel fine, a salicylic formula on the T zone alone keeps the work local.

For oily or congested skin, smooth salicylic on two evenings per week with rest days between. A PHA morning on a clear day may add polish for those who want more, but only after the twice weekly rhythm feels easy. Stay steady instead of chasing daily use. Extra renewal seldom helps crowded skin once the barrier starts to object.

Ease off when light tingling warms and lingers, when makeup snags on fresh flakes, or when SPF starts to sting. Rest a week, then return to the last comfortable pace.

FROM THE EDITORS

When acids bring sting, peel, or breakouts with dryness, halt exfoliants and retinoids, keep cleansing and moisture simple, shield with SPF, and see a dermatologist or pharmacist soon if irritation spreads or fails to settle.

06

The checklist

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- ☐ Select a single acid for your goal, face AHA or pore BHA or gradual PHA plus LHA
-
- ☐ Dab test near jawline and observe for one full day
-
- ☐ Begin AHAs plus BHAs 1 to 2 nights weekly, PHAs to 3 to 4 nights
-
- ☐ Keep acids for quiet evenings and layer SPF 30 or higher each morning as part of the ritual.
-
- ☐ Keep a single acid format in rotation, never wash plus toner plus serum
-
- ☐ Give acids and retinol their own separate evenings in the weekly routine.
-
- ☐ Save vitamin C for mornings and acids for evenings
-
- ☐ Rotate benzoyl peroxide and retinol, never layered together
-
- ☐ Notice tautness, sting, flush, shedding, glassy yet dry finish
-
- ☐ Rest actives and pare back once barrier cues emerge
-
- ☐ Stay at every cadence for two to three weeks before shifting
-
- ☐ Restart gently after rest at half previous cadence
-

07

Sources and further reading

- AHA vs BHA vs LHA vs PHA: The Difference between Exfoliating Acids in Skincare · [firstderm.com](https://www.firstderm.com)
- AHAs, BHAs & PHAs: exfoliating acids for smoother, clearer-looking skin · [dermalogica.com](https://www.dermalogica.com)
- Salicylic Acid - an overview · [sciencedirect.com](https://www.sciencedirect.com)
- How often should you exfoliate your face according to your skin type · [curology.com](https://www.curology.com)
- Guide to Skincare Acids: What Each One Does for Your Skin · [theinkeylist.com](https://www.theinkeylist.com)
- AHA, BHA, PHA and LHA: What are they and how should they be used? · [renude.co](https://www.renude.co)

For information only, not medical advice. Patch test anything new, and see a dermatologist about a reaction that lasts, spreads or stings.



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Laura runs the news desk and the texture guides at Second Skin. She keeps a drawer of empty jars she could not bring herself to throw away, sorted by how good they felt to open.
