



## SKIN EXFOLIATION: EXPOSING THE MYTHS

The opinions of skin care professionals regarding the frequency of skin exfoliation vary widely, from never to daily. One of the misleading factors that clouds the exfoliation discussion is that the term 'exfoliation' does not mean the same thing to everyone. Thus, I hope to clarify some of the myths regarding skin exfoliation by defining what it is, how it may be performed, and what effect it has on the skin.

The main purpose of exfoliating the skin is to remove or disrupt the dead epidermal cells of the outer surface of the skin (stratum corneum), exposing fresh skin cells and achieving a smooth, bright, revitalized skin texture. Additional benefits of skin exfoliation include:

- Prevention of clogged pores, resulting in fewer breakouts
- Stimulation of new skin cell production, which slows as we age
- Enhancement of nutrient penetration, which is needed for skin health.

The dead skin cells that dull the skin also protect the skin from environmental challenges, thus it is important to exfoliate without damaging or completely stripping the stratum corneum. The challenge is to determine what methods and products should be used to exfoliate with regard to one's skin type and condition in order to avoid aggravating, inflaming, irritating the skin or stripping the epidermis. There are three basic methods of exfoliation: mechanical, chemical and enzymatic. Mechanical exfoliation is achieved by using particles of hard substances to disrupt dead skin cells in procedures such as machine-applied microdermabrasion, buffing products and scrubs. The finer the particle the better the result of a more gentle exfoliation.

Chemical exfoliants include glycolic, lactic and salicylic acids as well as a variety of botanical acids that range from aggressive to mild. Each acid acts on the skin in a different way mostly dependent upon the molecular size and/or solubility in water or oils. In addition, Vitamin A derivatives are excellent chemical exfoliants. Often referred to as peels, chemical exfoliants, range from mild to aggressive depending on concentration and pH and may result in considerable shedding of skin layers within 3 to 7 days.

Exfoliating enzymes, mainly papain from papaya or bromelain from pineapple, digest proteins that attach the dead skin cell layer to the lower layers. Enzymes are usually applied to the skin in creams, gels, lotions or masks. The release of the dead skin cells occurs without the redness and irritation that may occur with strong chemical or mechanical procedures.

The misunderstanding of exfoliation, even among professionals, stems from applying the term in a broad-brush manner as if there is no difference among the products and modalities in relation to aggressiveness, technique, concentration and effectiveness. There is a world of difference between microdermabrasion and enzyme exfoliation, but, technically, both are used to remove dead skin cells from the skin's outer layer. Depending on which type of exfoliation one chooses and the condition of one's skin, the frequency may range from daily to monthly.

If there is one skin care myth that should be exposed, it is the notion that all forms of exfoliation are damaging to the skin. To the contrary, daily gentle exfoliation, accompanied with nutrients including anti-inflammatories and anti-oxidants, is an excellent way to achieve beautiful, healthy skin. Whatever your skin type or condition, there is an exfoliation procedure that will address your skin's needs.

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