

FREE INGREDIENT GUIDE

The Skincare Ingredient Guide

What each ingredient category actually does, who it suits, what to pair it with, what not to pair it with, and a checklist for reading a label before you buy.

Ingredient lists are written for regulators, not for shoppers, which is why a bottle can promise a great deal on the front and tell you almost nothing useful on the back. This guide fixes that. It groups the ingredients you will actually encounter into categories, explains what each category does cosmetically, says plainly who it suits, and gives you the pairing rules that prevent most of the irritation people blame on their skin. At the end there is a checklist to run before anything goes into your cart.

THREE THINGS TO KNOW BEFORE THE TABLES

First, skincare products are cosmetics, and nothing here diagnoses, treats, cures, or prevents any condition. Second, concentration and formulation matter as much as the ingredient name, so two products listing the same ingredient can behave very differently. Third, patch test everything before it touches your whole face, and introduce one new product at a time so you can tell what did what.

How to read an ingredient list in thirty seconds

1 Order tells you roughly how much is in there

Ingredients are listed in descending order by concentration down to one percent. Below one percent the order is at the manufacturer's discretion, so anything appearing after the preservatives and near the fragrance is likely present in small amounts.

2 The first five ingredients are the product

Those are the base: water, the main humectants, the main emollients, and the texture. Everything after them is a supporting cast.

3 Look for the actives you care about

If the ingredient advertised on the front appears after the preservative, you are mostly buying the base.

4 Check for fragrance and essential oils

Look for the word fragrance or parfum, and for the botanical oils commonly used for scent. If your skin is reactive, this is the first thing to check on any label.

5 Note the packaging, not only the formula

Ingredients that degrade in light and air, notably some vitamin C forms and retinoids, hold up better in opaque tubes and airless pumps than in clear jars.

6 Find the open-jar symbol

The small jar icon with 6M or 12M tells you how long the product is intended to be used after opening.

The main ingredient categories

WHAT EACH CATEGORY DOES, WHO IT SUITS, AND HOW IT PAIRS

Category	Common examples	What it does cosmetically	Suits	Pair with	Use caution alongside
Humectants	Glycerin, hyaluronic acid, sodium PCA, urea, panthenol, betaine	Draws and holds water in the surface layers, so skin looks plumper and feels more comfortable	Every skin type, including oily skin, which still needs water	Almost anything; apply to damp skin and seal with a moisturizer	Nothing in particular, but in very dry air humectants without an occlusive over them can leave skin feeling tighter
Emollients	Squalane, jojoba, caprylic triglyceride, shea butter, fatty alcohols	Fills the spaces between surface cells so skin feels smooth and looks less rough	Dry, normal, and combination skin; lighter emollients suit oily skin	Humectants underneath, occlusives on top when needed	Heavier plant butters on skin that congests easily
Occlusives	Petrolatum, mineral oil, dimethicone, beeswax, lanolin	Forms a surface layer that slows water loss, which is why skin feels protected overnight	Dry, very dry, and compromised-feeling skin; excellent as a final evening step	Applied last, over everything else	Applying under actives, which can increase how much gets through; also heavy for oily skin in the daytime
Barrier lipids	Ceramides, cholesterol, fatty acids, phytosphingosine	Supports the skin's own surface structure so it feels less tight and reactive	Every type, and particularly skin that feels easily unsettled	Humectants, niacinamide, and gentle everything	Nothing; these are among the easiest ingredients to include
Niacinamide	Niacinamide (vitamin B3)	Widely used for the appearance of uneven tone, visible pores, and general comfort	Most skin types; very well tolerated at lower percentages	Almost everything, including moisturizers and sunscreens	Very high percentages on reactive skin, which some people find causes flushing
Vitamin C	L-ascorbic acid, ascorbyl glucoside, magnesium	Antioxidant used in the morning for	Most types; derivatives are gentler than	Morning routine, under sunscreen;	Stacking with strong acids or a retinoid in the

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	ascorbyl phosphate, tetrahexyldecyl ascorbate	the look of brightness and evenness	high-strength L-ascorbic acid	vitamin E and ferulic acid are common partners	same routine, especially at high strength
Cosmetic retinoids	Retinol, retinal, retinyl esters, granactive retinoid	Long-established evening category used for the appearance of texture and fine lines	Most types, introduced slowly; not for use during pregnancy or breastfeeding without medical advice	Moisturizer, ceramides, and a buffering layer if needed	Exfoliating acids in the same routine, benzoyl peroxide products, and any strong treatment; alternate evenings instead
AHAs	Glycolic, lactic, mandelic acid	Water-soluble exfoliants that loosen surface cells so skin looks smoother and more even	Normal to dry skin and dull-looking texture; mandelic is the gentlest of the three	A simple moisturizer afterward, and diligent daily sunscreen	Retinoids on the same night, other exfoliants, scrubs, and any recently irritated skin
BHA	Salicylic acid	Oil-soluble, so it works within the pore lining; commonly found in products aimed at oily and congested-looking skin	Oily and combination skin, and the center panel of the face	Lightweight moisturizer; applied to zones rather than the whole face if only part of it is oily	Stacking with AHAs and retinoids; follow the directions on the packaging, since these products are regulated as drugs in some markets
PHAs	Gluconolactone, lactobionic acid	Larger-molecule exfoliants that work more gently and hydrate as they go	Skin that finds AHAs and BHA too much	Barrier ingredients and moisturizers	Other exfoliants on the same day, which defeats the purpose of choosing a gentle one
Azelaic acid	Azelaic acid	Used cosmetically for the appearance of	Combination and reactive skin looking for something	Moisturizer, niacinamide	Layering with several other actives at once; higher strengths

Category	Common examples	What it does cosmetically	Suits	Pair with	Use caution alongside
		uneven tone and texture; generally well tolerated	gentler than an acid or retinoid		are prescription only in many markets
Soothing and comfort ingredients	Centella asiatica, panthenol, allantoin, bisabolol, colloidal oatmeal, madecassoside	Helps skin feel calmer and look less red after an ordinary day	Reactive and easily flushed skin, and anyone using actives	Everything; particularly useful in a recovery routine	Nothing, though botanical extracts can themselves be a sensitizer for some people
Peptides	Palmitoyl tripeptides, copper peptides, acetyl hexapeptide	Supporting ingredients used for the appearance of firmness and smoothness	Most types; a gentle option for skin that dislikes actives	Moisturizers, niacinamide, barrier ingredients	Very low pH acid products in the same layer, which can affect how some peptides behave
Antioxidants beyond vitamin C	Vitamin E, ferulic acid, resveratrol, green tea polyphenols	Supporting ingredients used in daytime formulas alongside sunscreen	Most types	Morning routine, layered under sunscreen	Nothing significant; these are usually formulated into a product rather than layered separately
Sunscreen filters	Zinc oxide, titanium dioxide, and various organic filters depending on market	The daily protective step, and the one with the most consistent effect on how skin looks over years	Everyone, every day	Applied last in the morning, over moisturizer, in a generous amount	Mixing your own with moisturizer, which dilutes it; and applying too little, which is the most common error
Oil-absorbing and clay ingredients	Kaolin, bentonite, silica, charcoal	Absorbs surface oil so skin looks less shiny short term	Oily skin, used occasionally rather than daily	Follow with a lightweight moisturizer	Daily use on dry or reactive skin, and stacking with exfoliants in the same session
		Affects how a product smells	People with no history of	Nothing in particular	Reactive skin, compromised

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Fragrance and essential oils	Fragrance, parfum, citrus and mint oils, linalool, limonene	and how using it feels; contributes nothing to the skin itself	reaction who enjoy the experience		skin, and any routine that already contains actives

The pairing rules in one page

COMBINATIONS WORTH PLANNING AROUND

Combination	The issue	What to do instead
Retinoid plus an exfoliating acid, same evening	Two strong turnover ingredients at once is the most common cause of irritation	Alternate evenings, and keep at least one night gentle between them
Two or more exfoliants in one routine	An acid toner plus an acid serum plus a scrub is not three times the benefit	Pick one exfoliant and one frequency
High-strength vitamin C plus a strong acid	Both are low pH and the combination is more than most skin wants	Vitamin C in the morning, acid in the evening
A new active plus a new fragranced product	If something reacts, you have no way to know which one	One new product at a time, held for at least two weeks
Actives on already irritated skin	Irritation compounds and recovery gets longer	Cleanser, moisturizer, and sunscreen only until skin feels normal for a full week
Sunscreen mixed into moisturizer	Dilution changes the amount you are actually applying	Apply sunscreen as its own final step
Heavy occlusive under an active	Layer order can change how much of the active gets through	Occlusives go last, over everything
Scrubs plus acids in the same session	Mechanical and chemical exfoliation together is easy to overdo	Choose one, and let a scrub be occasional at most

Which categories to prioritize for your skin

A STARTING SHORTLIST BY SKIN TYPE

Skin type	Prioritize	Go slowly with
Dry	Humectants, emollients, ceramides, an occlusive final step at night	Strong acids, foaming cleansers, clay masks
Normal	A simple moisturizer, daily sunscreen, one active you enjoy	Adding several actives at once because nothing is wrong
Combination	Lightweight hydration everywhere, richer cream on the cheeks, BHA on the center panel only	Treating the whole face like the oiliest part of it
Oily	Gel textures, humectants, niacinamide, BHA, lightweight sunscreen	Astringents, daily clay, and anything that leaves skin squeaky
Reactive	Barrier lipids, panthenol, colloidal oatmeal, fragrance-free everything	Fragrance, essential oils, high-strength actives, physical scrubs
Dehydrated, any type	Humectants applied to damp skin, then a moisturizer to seal	Assuming the answer is a richer cream when the issue is water, not oil

Marketing words and what they actually mean

- **Non-comedogenic**

Not a regulated term with a standardized test behind it. Useful as a signal of intent, not as a guarantee for your skin.

- **Hypoallergenic**

Also not a regulated term in most markets. It suggests a formulator's aim rather than a tested outcome.

- **Unscented versus fragrance-free**

Fragrance-free means no fragrance was added. Unscented can mean a masking fragrance was used to neutralize a base smell, which is still fragrance.

- **Clean and natural**

Marketing categories, not safety categories. Plant extracts and essential oils are among the more common sensitizers.

- **Dermatologist tested**

Tells you a test happened. It does not tell you what was tested, on how many people, or what the result was.

- **Clinically proven**

Ask proven to do what, measured how, and over what period. Without those details it is a phrase rather than a finding.

The product checklist

Run this before anything goes into your cart. It takes under a minute per product and it is the difference between a routine and a collection.

Before you buy

- ☐ I can name the slot this fills in my routine, and it is not already filled
 - ☐ The advertised ingredient appears high enough in the list to be doing real work
 - ☐ I have checked for fragrance and essential oils, and I know how my skin handles them
 - ☐ The texture suits my skin type and the season I am buying it for
 - ☐ The packaging suits the formula, opaque and air-limited for light-sensitive ingredients
 - ☐ It does not duplicate an active I already use, in a different bottle
 - ☐ If it is an active, I have somewhere to put it in the week without stacking it on another active
 - ☐ I can commit to using it for at least eight weeks before judging it
 - ☐ The size is realistic; I will finish it before the open-jar period expires
 - ☐ I have somewhere discreet to patch test it for several days first
 - ☐ It makes cosmetic claims, and anything promising to treat a condition is a question for a clinician instead
 - ☐ I am adding one product this week, not three
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Your current shelf, audited

My skin type from the guide above

My cleanser, and the category it belongs to

My moisturizer, and its key categories

My sunscreen, and whether I use enough of it

Active 1, and the evenings I use it

Active 2, if any, and the evenings I use it

Any two products in my routine that duplicate each other

The one category genuinely missing from my shelf

Ingredients my skin has reacted to before

HOW LONG TO GIVE SOMETHING

Comfort changes fast, often within days. Anything relating to the look of texture and tone moves on the timescale of skin turnover, so give a product at least eight weeks of consistent use before deciding, and judge it on photographs taken in the same light rather than on the mirror on a given morning. If a product stings, burns, or leaves lasting redness, that is not a break-in period. Stop using it.

SHOP BY CATEGORY, NOT BY CLAIM

Fill the one slot your shelf is missing

You now have a skin type, a shortlist of categories worth prioritizing, and a checklist to run at the shelf. Browse Viva Beauty & Skincare by category and texture and buy the one thing your routine is actually missing.

Shop the collection at vivabeautyandskincare.com

Important. This guide is general cosmetic information only. It is not medical advice and is not intended to diagnose, treat, cure, or prevent any skin condition or disease. Ingredient behavior depends on concentration, formulation, and individual skin, and regulations differ by market. Always patch test new products and follow the directions on the packaging. If you are pregnant or breastfeeding, or if you have persistent, painful, spreading, or worsening skin concerns, consult a board-certified dermatologist or another qualified healthcare professional. Individual results vary.