

GOOD HOUSEKEEPING

A Guide to Glycerin for Skin, According to Dermatologists

This skincare ingredient hydrates and softens like a pro.

BY DORI PRICE PUBLISHED: MAY 28, 2024

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When it comes to skincare ingredients, there are trendy ones and there are tried and true classics that are in many of your go-to products. Glycerin falls into the latter category. "Glycerin, also known as glycerol, is a simple colorless, odorless liquid that is non-toxic," explains Navin S. Arora, D.O., F.A.A.D., and founder of Borealis Dermatology in Garden City, New York. "Glycerin is a humectant, which means it attracts moisture from the environment into the skin. It is widely used in various skincare products due to its moisturizing properties."

"Glycerin comes in different grades of purity and can be manufactured from different sources," says Chiara Butler, a reviews analyst in the Good Housekeeping Institute Beauty, Health and Sustainability Lab. "The glycerin used in skincare is typically USP grade, which means that it meets a high standard of purity set by the United States Pharmacopeia and it is fit for pharmaceutical use."

Glycerin can be made from vegetable, animal or synthetic sources. "Vegetable glycerin comes from a vegetable oil source such as palm, soybean or corn oil and is the type most commonly used in skincare," says Butler. Synthetic glycerin is produced through chemical synthesis, often from petroleum-based products. And pure glycerin can be purchased online or from drugstores. If you want to try pure glycerin on your skin, "look for a bottle that is USP grade," says Butler.



You'll find glycerin in a lot of your go-to products, as "almost every skincare product that contains water also contains glycerin," says Butler. It is often found in cleansers, serums, creams, toners, mists, sunscreens and other products. "It improves the hydrating quality of skincare products and also has some effect as a preservative booster in products that contain water," she adds.

The skin benefits of glycerin

- **Provides skin barrier protection:** "It strengthens the skin's natural barrier, preventing moisture loss and protecting against environmental irritants, according to one study," says Dr. Arora.

- **Moisturizes:** "Glycerin can penetrate and diffuse through the outermost layer of the skin to create a reservoir of moisture in it without disrupting its structure," says Butler. "It also helps skin maintain its elasticity, a property that the skin loses when it's very dry."
- **Improves texture:** "Regular use of glycerin can lead to smoother, softer skin," says Dr. Arora.
- **Heals skin:** "It can aid in the healing of wounds and enhance skin repair processes," says Dr. Arora.
- **Acts as a skin protectant:** "The FDA recognizes glycerin as a skin protectant in over-the-counter drug products when used at 20 to 45% in a product," explains Butler.

Side effects of glycerin on skin

"Glycerin is generally very well tolerated, as our skin produces it naturally," says Butler. She notes that there are a very small number of case studies about allergic reactions to glycerin, so it's not impossible to have a reaction to glycerin, but it's rare.

"If one did occur, symptoms might include redness, itching and swelling," says Dr. Arora. "High concentrations of glycerin could possibly cause irritation, especially in sensitive skin."

How to use glycerin for skin

"Look for products where glycerin is listed as one of the primary ingredients," says Dr. Arora, "including moisturizers, serums and hydrating masks." Butler also likes toners and essences as "they can be applied to dry skin after cleansing, and then followed by a cream to lock in hydration," she says.

Products containing glycerin don't have to be applied in any particular way; they can be used any time of day. "If you want to apply pure glycerin, you can apply it to skin with a cotton pad or your fingers, or mix it with a bit of your moisturizer in your hand right before you apply it," says Butler. "However, don't add it into a full jar of product, as that can disrupt the product's formula."

For nighttime use, Dr. Arora suggests using a thick layer of a glycerin-containing night cream or a

mask to maximize hydration while you sleep.

What skin types is glycerin best for?

Glycerin is suitable for all skin types, including dry, oily and combination skin. "It is particularly beneficial for dry and sensitive skin due to its moisturizing and soothing properties," says Dr. Arora. "However, even those with oily skin can benefit from glycerin as it helps to balance moisture levels without clogging pores." Butler notes that those with oily skin may want to use products containing glycerin rather than applying pure glycerin, as it can feel heavy.

Are there any reasons not to use glycerin on the face?

Glycerin is generally safe for use on the face. "If you have extremely sensitive skin or a known allergy to glycerin, it's best to perform a patch test before using it widely," says Dr. Arora. "Additionally, using very high concentrations of the ingredient can cause irritation, so it's important to follow each product's specific instructions."

Butler cautions that pure glycerin can feel very sticky on skin. "To avoid that issue, stick with regular products that are formulated with glycerin," she says.

Is glycerin better than hyaluronic acid?

When it comes to these two top-notch moisturizers, one isn't "better" than the other. "Glycerin and hyaluronic acid are both excellent hydrating ingredients, but they work in slightly different ways," says Dr. Arora. "Hyaluronic acid is renowned for its ability to hold up to 1,000 times its weight in water, providing intense hydration. Glycerin, on the other hand, draws moisture into the skin and strengthens the skin barrier."

Butler agrees and feels that it's hard to say if one hydrates better as "glycerin is one molecule while hyaluronic acid is a polymer, so it comes in a range of molecular weights with different properties."

However, Butler does note one advantage glycerin has over HA: a much lower cost. "It's a great hydrating ingredient that's also cost effective."

Ultimately, the choice between the two really depends on your skin's needs, sensitivities and how it responds to each ingredient. Many skincare products actually combine both for maximum hydration benefits.

Will glycerin clog pores?

No. "Glycerin is non-comedogenic, meaning it does not clog pores," says Dr. Arora. "It is a lightweight ingredient that is easily absorbed into the skin, making it suitable for those with acne-prone skin as well."

Best glycerin skincare products:



CeraVe Daily Moisturizing Lotion for Dry Skin



CVS Beauty USP Pure Glycerin



Neutrogena Hydro Boost Gel Hydrating Gel Cleanser



Olay Super Serum