

marie claire

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Beauty

Prominent dermatologist Dr. Leslie Baumann reports that up to 50 percent of her patients have sensitive skin. Whether the cause of our stress is internal (emotions and hormones) or environmental (chemicals and plants), our formerly hard-core skin has gone emo.

One reason for the uptick in self-reported sufferers is that "sensitive" has become a catchall term for four distinct types of ailments: acne, rosacea, contact dermatitis, and skin that burns and stings. The common denominator here is inflammation, which is exacerbated by chemicals—and boy, are we familiar with those. The Environmental Working Group, a public-health organization that aims to raise awareness of toxins, reports that the average American woman is exposed to 126 chemicals through her daily cosmetic routine—which, thanks to an explosion of beauty products on the market, has become increasingly complicated—and that's just what she consciously puts on her skin. Now consider the chemicals in our cleaning supplies and sprayed on the food we eat, not to mention skyrocketing pollution levels. It's no wonder we're collectively irritated.

My problem is that my skin is touchy and rapidly wrinkling. I decide to consult NYC dermatologist Dr. Amy Wechsler to see whether my case is hopeless. After all, I don't want to do anything, um, rash, like say, dump the entire contents of my bathroom shelves and switch to salves made exclusively for infants.

"We typically think of sensitive skin as dry and chafed or red and itchy, but flushing or breaking out as a result of stress are signs, too," she tells me. "Regardless, what makes the difference in your skincare is actually pretty basic—your products should be fragrance-free and noncomedogenic. Fragrance is the number one culprit of irritation."

Another is our tendency to overdo it, exfoliation-wise. There's no reason to scrub away the shame with a motorized brush or gritty cleanser, Wechsler reminds me. Using your

easy does it

The beauty industry has keyed in to the fact that more and more women identify as sensitive. Here's the latest crop of gentle yet effective products aimed at the thin-skinned.



1. Burt's Bees Sensitive Facial Cleanser, \$10
2. MyBody Protect & Soothe Tinted Sun Cream, \$69
3. Perricone MD Possible Causes, \$91
4. L'Oréal Paris Hydrating Cream, \$25
5. Dr. Leslie Baumann's Skin Care
6. Avène Body Oil, \$20

hands to wash your face most days is all most of us need.

But does that mean the sensitive must be forced to age gracefully without the help of serious antiaging treatments? "Lasers can be well tolerated—it just depends on the settings and the doctor administering them," Wechsler says, explaining that allergic reactions to injectables, such as Botox and Juvederm, tend to be rare, and aren't more likely to occur in sensitive patients.

Turns out, even notorious angry-skin-maker prescription Retin-A—and over-the-counter antiagers—can be used by us adult babies. The secret is that less really is more: Wechsler advises patients to try a little dab on the side of their cheek for three nights before turning themselves over to a new treatment, and to start with the least concentrated amount (0.025 percent) just once a week. "You can gradually increase the frequency of application over time," Wechsler says. "Retin-A is a drug, and like any drug, you need to build up a tolerance. We call it 'becoming Retinized.'"

Armed with this knowledge, I abstain from exfoliating altogether, and decide to give Retin-A a go. While it's tempting to use more, not less, of any product that claims to help eradicate wrinkles, I practice the restraint of a monk. I dab a pea-sized amount on my face once a week for a month, then slowly build up to three applications per week. For now, that's where I'm holding steady. Unbelievably, the oft-bemoaned red, peeling face of Retin-A hasn't materialized.

Emboldened, I decide to experiment with some of the sophisticated new products geared toward the sensitive, all of them perfectly grown-up-sounding. Atopalm's moisturizing, paraben-free cleanser melts away makeup but doesn't cause breakouts. Perricone MD has launched a hypoallergenic collection that's made for erasing lines while 86'ing fragrance, parabens, phthalates, sulfates, mineral oil, petroleum, and synthetic dyes—all potential irritants. My favorite new discovery is Avène's delicious Body Oil. It smells nothing like pine, but it's perfect for a massage that won't force me into hiding. **mc**