

Topical Retinoids

The medications we call ‘retinoids’ are those which contain ingredients like *tretinoin*, *adapalene*, or *tazarotene*. While most are available generically, they can also be found in several brands including Retin-A®, Differin®, Tazorac®, and others.

Retinoids provide a number of benefits, such as unclogging the pores (for acne patients) as well as helping to maintain younger, healthier-looking skin cells (for those seeking cosmetic improvement). Some topical retinoids can even help in the treatment of psoriasis.

If you are prescribed one of these medications, there are a few things you need to know:

- 1) **If just starting a retinoid on the face, you might want to consider using it only 2-3x/week for the first few weeks.** The reason is that these medications are *notorious* for causing irritation (such as redness and peeling), but most patients can avoid this by starting slowly. By being careful for the first few weeks, you’re allowing time for your skin to get used to the medication and the irritation should be minimal. After the first week or two, you can *gradually* add extra days of use per week, until eventually your skin can tolerate the full frequency prescribed by your doctor.
- 2) The general rule of thumb is that a **‘pea-sized’ amount should be enough to treat your entire face.** Using more than this amount can increase the likelihood of irritation. You should also be sure to apply it to *dry* skin. Mixing it with just a little bit of bland facial moisturizer (Cetaphil®, Cerave®, etc.) is OK if it helps you to spread it easier.
- 3) **Avoid highly sensitive areas such as the eyelids, corners of the mouth, and creases around the nose** (unless instructed by your physician). These areas are so sensitive that your skin may never fully acclimate to the medication.
- 4) **Retinoids may increase your sensitivity to the sun.** For the average patient going to school or work (and indoors most of the day), this is not a significant concern. However, if you’re using one of these products on your face *and* you’ll be spending any significant time outdoors, you should consider using a sunblock-containing face lotion in the morning. All of the top manufacturers such as Oil of Olay®, Neutrogena®, Cetaphil®, and Cerave® make SPF-containing face lotions. If you do use a sunscreen, just remember that it should usually be applied to your skin last, *after* you’ve first applied any medications (such as topical ‘retinoids’ or others).