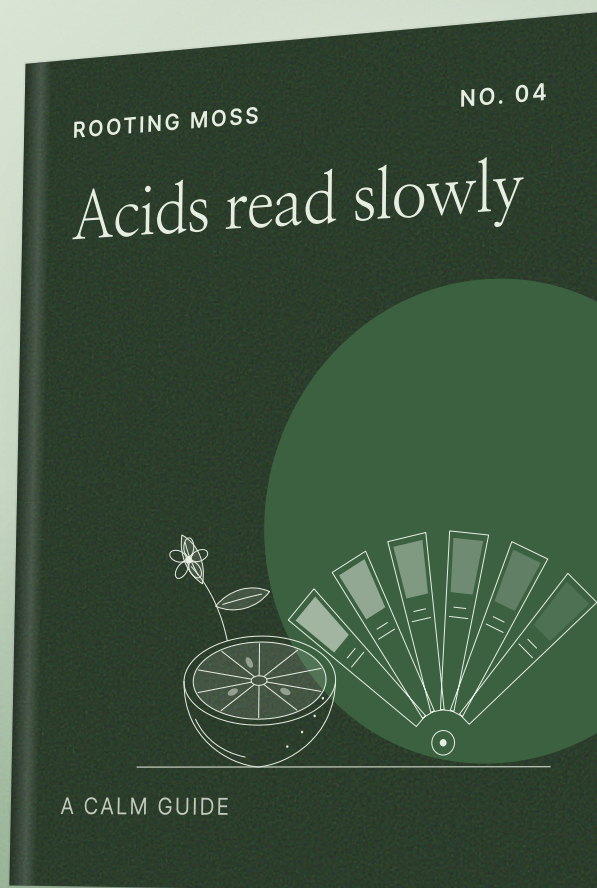




FIELD GUIDE · SKIN

How to steady acid exfoliation without wearing skin thin

This guide is for careful skincare buyers who want smoother tone and clearer pores without guesswork. After reading, you will be able to choose the right acid, set a calm starting frequency, and spot trouble early.

- **Start low**
One acid at a time, once or twice weekly, then build slowly.
- **Match solubility**
Water soluble for surface texture, oil soluble for pores.
- **Mind barrier**
Tightness and stinging mean pause, simplify, and protect.

By Shannon Brekke · Updated Aug 16, 2026 · 9 min read

CONTENTS

01	How acids loosen surface cells	05	Signs of strain and a conservative weekly rhythm
02	AHA, BHA, PHA and LHA at a glance	06	The checklist
03	Strength, pH and frequency without guesswork	07	Sources and further reading
04	What not to layer and how to separate		

Many routines fail because acids are layered too often, too strong, and too early. Skin turns tight, shiny, and reactive before tone ever improves. Once solubility, size, strength, and spacing make sense, exfoliation becomes a quiet weekly rhythm rather than a gamble.

01

How acids loosen surface cells

Skin sheds dead cells every day through desquamation. That turnover slows with age, dry air, and slower renewal, so surface cells linger and light scatters unevenly. Texture looks rough, tone looks dull, and pores look fuller because keratin and sebum debris collect at the opening.

Physical scrubs remove cells by friction. Chemical exfoliants loosen the bonds between cells so they release more evenly. Control is the reason many reactive skins prefer the second path. A leave on fluid or a short contact rinse can be dosed, spaced, and stopped, while a grain keeps abrading as long as it is rubbed.

Acids need an acidic environment to remain in the free active form. Irritation rises with concentration at a given pH and rises as pH falls at a given concentration. That pair matters more than the percent printed on the front. A lower percent at a lower pH can feel stronger than a higher percent held closer to neutral, and front labels rarely state free acid. Tolerance also varies, which is why exact best percent and pH for each skin type cannot be read from marketing copy.

Dr Justine Kluk, consultant dermatologist, notes that “Exfoliating acids have become increasingly popular with skincare enthusiasts and those looking to improve their skin over the last couple of years.” Her advice for the start holds for the whole routine: “go slow when starting out and keep the rest of your routine gentle and simple.”

AHA, BHA, PHA and LHA at a glance

AHAs include glycolic acid, lactic acid, tartaric acid, citric acid, malic acid and mandelic acid and are water soluble and act on the skin surface. Think of them as field workers on the top soil. They suit uneven tone, rough patches, and early fine surface lines where the need is renewal rather than pore clearing.

Size changes behavior within the family. Glycolic acid has the smallest AHA molecule, penetrates fastest, and exfoliates most aggressively at the same pH and concentration as larger AHAs. Lactic acid is larger and gentler than glycolic acid and also acts as a humectant that brings hydration with exfoliation. Mandelic acid is the largest common AHA, with the slowest and gentlest action, suited for sensitive feeling skin and tones prone to post inflammatory hyperpigmentation.

BHAs are oil soluble, penetrate lipid rich pores, and help clear keratin and sebum debris that contribute to congestion. Salicylic acid is the most common BHA in skincare and is used for acne, blackheads, calluses and warts. Human upper arm stratum corneum treated with 2 percent salicylic acid is significantly more easily removed by tape stripping than vehicle treated control sites. The anti inflammatory effect of salicylic acid is most pronounced at concentrations between 0.5 percent and 5 percent w/w. One detail for readers of ingredient science: salicylic acid is described as a BHA in skincare sources but one pharmacology overview notes Yu and Van Scott classify it as a phenolic aromatic acid rather than a true beta hydroxy acid. The routine advice stays the same.

PHAs include gluconolactone, lactobionic acid and maltobionic acid and have larger molecular structures than AHAs so they penetrate less and work more slowly. LHAs are derived from salicylic acid, are more fat soluble than BHA, penetrate more slowly, and are gentler for acne treatment in sensitive skin. Both suit sensitive skin with slower action, or anyone who wants polish without a sharp start.

A short comparison helps:

FAMILY	SOLUBILITY AND PACE	BEST SUITED FOR
AHA	Water soluble, surface action, pace set by molecule size	Dull tone, uneven texture, dry surface roughness
BHA	Oil soluble, enters lipid rich pores	Oily skin, congestion, blackheads, blemish prone areas
PHA	Large molecule, slower surface action	Sensitive feeling skin, first acid, dry skin wanting mild renewal
LHA	Salicylic derived, more fat soluble, slower penetration	Congestion in sensitive skin, gentle acne care

Names that sound like acids are not always exfoliants. Hyaluronic acid hydrates and does not exfoliate, tranexamic acid works on pigment signaling, and azelaic acid calms visible redness through a different mechanism.

FROM THE EDITORS

Strength is not the same as suitability. A smaller molecule moves faster and a lower pH frees more acid, so gentleness comes from size, formula, and spacing rather than from a plant name or a low number alone.

03

Strength, pH and frequency without guesswork

Potency order begins with molecule size. Among AHAs, glycolic leads, lactic sits in the middle with added humectant softness, and mandelic trails with a slow hand. For salicylic acid, formulation pH shapes the result. Salicylic acid has a pKa of 2.98 and formulations with pH close to the pKa give significantly more exfoliation than formulations at pH significantly greater than the pKa. That is why higher percent is not automatically stronger. Free acid depends on pH, base, contact time, and skin itself.

AHAs may increase sensitivity to sun during use and for up to a week after stopping, according to FDA guidance on labeling cosmetics containing AHAs. A dermatology led acid guide advises introducing acid exfoliants gradually starting 2 to 3 times per week and wearing broad spectrum SPF 30 or higher when using AHAs or BHAs. Night use suits AHAs, morning calls for sunscreen without exception. Salicylic acid has shown sun protective abilities in some research, while daily SPF is still advised with AHA and BHA because exfoliation can transiently increase UV sensitivity. Daily SPF covers both views.

Starting frequency differs by source, so start low and adjust to tolerance. Exfoliating with acids should be done at most two to three times per week, and once or twice per week for sensitive skin. One esthetician guide advises two to three times per week for oily skin, once or twice per week for normal or combination skin, and once per week or every two weeks for dry or sensitive skin. A brand safe use guide advises starting AHAs and BHAs 1 to 2 times per week and building up over several weeks, while PHAs can start 3 to 4 times per week because they are gentler. How quickly an individual can safely increase frequency without barrier disruption is not established, so hold each step for two to three weeks.

Patch test first. Place a small amount behind the ear or along the jaw, then wait a full day. Mild tingling for a minute or two can be normal with a new acid. Burning, spreading redness, itching, or swelling is not. Rinse, simplify, and do not repeat that formula.

04

What not to layer and how to separate

Retinoids and acids are both exfoliating and should not be used simultaneously, and strong AHAs should not be paired with retinol on the same night until skin is acclimated. Even after acclimation, many skins do better when the two are kept apart. Alternate nights or keep acids on one or two set evenings and retinoid on different evenings, with rest nights between.

Vitamin C should be used in the morning with SPF and acids saved for night because exfoliants lower pH and can destabilize vitamin C and increase irritation risk. The split also respects sun behavior. Antioxidant plus SPF by day supports daytime defense, acid by night supports renewal while skin rests.

Benzoyl peroxide can deactivate retinol when used simultaneously and amplify dryness, so alternating nights is advised if both are used. Niacinamide needs context. Niacinamide is described as pairing well with many ingredients yet also listed as potentially too aggressive with exfoliating acids in sensitive skin, so context and strength matter. If skin is sturdy, a simple niacinamide moisturizer on acid nights may feel fine. Keep niacinamide for off nights when skin is delicate and watch for flushing or sting.

Keep the rest plain while acids settle in. Gentle cleanser, simple moisturizer, and SPF leave fewer variables. Whether a specific combination product is well formulated for a given routine cannot be judged without seeing the full formula, so add one active at a time.

Signs of strain and a conservative weekly rhythm

Signs of over exfoliating include irritation, redness, peeling, sensitivity to other products, tightness, dryness, and a shiny but not oily appearance. Barrier damage signs include persistent dryness and tightness, redness, stinging or burning on product application, flaking and rough texture, and breakouts alongside dryness and sensitivity. Sudden sensitivity to a trusted moisturizer often arrives first. Skin may look polished from across the room yet feel thin and thirsty up close.

Pause all exfoliating acids and retinoids when those signs appear. Return to gentle cleanser, moisturizer, and broad spectrum SPF. Skip fragrance, strong vitamin C, and benzoyl peroxide until calm returns. How long barrier recovery will take for a specific person after over exfoliation is not established, so wait until tightness, sting, and flaking have settled for several days before retesting one acid at half the former frequency. Seek professional care for swelling, crusting, spreading rash, pain, or breakouts that worsen after pausing.

A steady week uses one acid only. Cleansers with acid rinse away and suit oily skin for short contact. Toners, pads, and serums stay on longer and suit targeted work. Choose one vehicle, not a stack.

For dry or sensitive skin, use PHA or mandelic or lactic once weekly in the evening. Cleanse gently, apply a thin layer, moisturize well, and wear SPF daily. Hold for three weeks. Move to twice weekly only if mornings feel supple and calm.

For normal or combination skin, use lactic or a mild glycolic or salicylic once or twice weekly in the evening, on set nights. Keep the other nights free of retinoid and benzoyl peroxide. If pores through the nose and chin stay congested while cheeks feel fine, a salicylic formula on the T zone alone can keep the work local.

For oily or congested skin, use salicylic two evenings per week with rest days between. A PHA morning on a non acid day is an option for those who want more polish, but only after the twice weekly rhythm feels easy. Hold steady rather than chasing daily use. More frequent renewal rarely improves congested skin once the barrier starts to protest.

Step back when mild tingling turns to warmth that lingers, when makeup catches on new flakes, or when SPF stings. Skip a week, then resume at the prior comfortable pace.

FROM THE EDITORS

If skin stings, peels, or breaks out with dryness after acids, stop exfoliants and retinoids, keep cleansing and moisture simple, protect with SPF, and seek a dermatologist or pharmacist promptly if irritation spreads or does not settle.

06

The checklist

- ☐ Choose one acid matched to need, surface AHA or pore BHA or slow PHA and LHA
- ☐ Patch test along jaw and wait a full day
- ☐ Start AHAs and BHAs 1 to 2 times weekly, PHAs up to 3 to 4 times
- ☐ Keep acids at night and SPF 30 or higher every morning
- ☐ Use one acid vehicle per routine, not cleanser plus toner plus serum
- ☐ Separate acids from retinol on different nights
- ☐ Keep vitamin C for morning and acids for night
- ☐ Alternate benzoyl peroxide and retinol, never stacked
- ☐ Watch for tightness, sting, redness, peeling, shiny but dry look
- ☐ Pause actives and simplify when barrier signs appear
- ☐ Hold each frequency for two to three weeks before changing
- ☐ Reintroduce slowly after a break at half former frequency

Sources and further reading

- AHA vs BHA vs LHA vs PHA: The Difference between Exfoliating Acids in Skincare · [firstderm.com](https://www.firstderm.com)
- AHAs, BHAs & PHAs: exfoliating acids for smoother, clearer-looking skin · [dermalogica.com](https://www.dermalogica.com)
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- How often should you exfoliate your face according to your skin type · [curology.com](https://www.curology.com)
- Guide to Skincare Acids: What Each One Does for Your Skin · [theinkeylist.com](https://www.theinkeylist.com)
- AHA, BHA, PHA and LHA: What are they and how should they be used? · [renude.co](https://www.renude.co)

For information only, not medical advice. Check with a qualified professional before using herbal remedies.



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