

# Potion Control

**Perfectionists and slackers alike: Your skin care has arrived, in the form of matched kits of lotions, cleansers, and anti-aging creams. By Cara Birnbaum**

**Y**ou'd think Sephora was an all-you-can-eat buffet the way women have been loading up on skin creams. Dermatologists say it's time to end the feeding frenzy and impose a little self-discipline. Enter the skin-care system—a sort of South Beach diet for the face, serving the same ingredients found in à la carte products in carefully measured doses. These new kits are faster and more efficient than ever. They're also more focused, offering specific solutions to acne, brown spots, irritation, and early fine lines in a few steps.

Systems were popular for decades, with the Clinique three-step program selling more than 270 million products since its introduc-

tion in 1968. Erno Laszlo once insisted on a full nine products for each customer, requiring 20 minutes a day. Not anymore. "Women don't have the kind of time they once did," says cosmetics chemist Mark Potter, who was charged with "eliminating overkill." Potter replaced several items with a powerhouse lotion, and while the six-step regimen is still elaborate, "the process shouldn't take more than five minutes."

There's logic to selecting a limited number of compatible products. Otherwise, according to New York City dermatologist Patricia Wexler, "women can wind up using several different products that contain high, possibly damaging, levels of glycolic acid or retinoids." An excess of creams can also dull the skin and clog the pores. Buffets may be tempting, but there are better ways to feed your face.

## **WHAT IT IS:** Neutrogena Healthy Skin Radiance System.

**WHY:** After about age 30, a woman's skin-cell turnover slows dramatically, leading to a buildup that dulls the complexion. Physical and chemical exfoliants help, but if they're used in excess, they can cause flaking. So Neutrogena developed a cocktail of alpha and beta

hydroxy acids for its cleanser that gradually breaks down surface cells, smoothing fine lines and discoloration.

**HOW IT WORKS:** With microfine beads and a low dose of glycolic and salicylic acids, the cleanser buffs away dull skin, which in turn increases the absorption of active ingredients in the subsequent products. An eye cream

contains protient, "a combination of antioxidants and DMAE, which has anti-inflammatory properties," says Neutrogena executive director Yohani Appa. (Indeed, DMAE was found to increase skin firmness in 30 people studied at the University Medical Center of Liege, in Belgium.) The Radiance Moisturizer has SPF 15 to stave off

future skin damage and a small amount of self-tanner to give skin a little color.

**WHAT AN EXPERT SAYS:** "Both salicylic and glycolic acids, in appropriate amounts, can stimulate the skin to regenerate collagen," says Howard Fein, a Palos Verdes, California, dermatologist. "Those are typically found in chemical peels, so claims that the system can produce a radiant complexion seem attainable. The vitamin E in the eye cream has antioxidant properties and may help minimize the effects of sun damage. There's no need to add AHAs to the moisturizer, so it makes sense that there are none in the third step."

**WHAT WE SAY:** This was easy to use, and we liked that the face wash prepped our skin for the moisturizer—the standout product. We've been phobic about self-tanner, but after the compliments we got, we're converts. The eye cream left our undereye area shiny and tight.

**COST:** \$27.99 for the kit.

**WHAT IT IS:** Clean & Clear Advantage.

**WHY:** Many women have a war chest of high-octane acne fighters at home—and layer on all of them at the first sign of a breakout. Rather than assaulting the skin with ten different superstrength ingredients, which can leave the face flaky and irritated, the Clean & Clear Advantage line offers a calibrated dose of one proven zit buster: salicylic acid.

**HOW IT WORKS:** A cleanser containing 2 percent salicylic acid (the maximum amount allowed for over-the-counter formulas) removes dirt and oil from pores and sloughs off dead skin cells, while glycerin counteracts the drying effects of the acid. To prevent future breakouts, the Acne Clearing Lotion gives the entire face a second shot of salicylic acid, but only at a 1 percent concentration to prevent irritation. The optional Acne Spot Treatment with 2 percent salicylic acid reduces the redness and swelling of existing blemishes.

**WHAT AN EXPERT SAYS:** "Salicylic acid is a great acne fighter for people with oily or combination skin because of its exfoliating and pore-cleansing properties," says New York City dermatologist Arielle Kauvar. "This system does a good job of balancing the ingredients with nongreasy moisturizers to prevent dryness. And though salicylic acid is

excellent for preventing blackheads and whiteheads, I'm curious why the system doesn't also contain an ingredient with anti-inflammatory and antibacterial properties, like benzoyl peroxide, which fights larger, red pimples."

**WHAT WE SAY:** The products all have a light consistency, so they layer well without making the skin feel slick. Following this system took very little time, but after a month of use, we have yet to notice a huge change in our acne.

**COST:** \$6.49 per product.

**WHAT IT IS:** DDF Hyperpigmentation Kit.

**WHY:** You've sworn off sun worshipping, but your skin is still suffering the consequences: brown spots and blotches. Skin lighteners and exfoliants help, but only if used in the right proportions. This kit, designed by New York City dermatologist Howard Sobel, promises to speed cell turnover, slow melanin production, and gently bleach away discoloration.

**HOW IT WORKS:** Of the seven melanin-inhibiting ingredients in DDF's Brightening Cleanser, the licorice may be the most effective. The extract appears to block the melanin-producing enzyme tyrosinase, according to a Japanese study in the journal *Pigment Cell Research*. Meanwhile, salicylic, azelaic, and kojic acids break down existing discoloration. A daytime fade cream with 2 percent hydroquinone bleaches spots, and broad-spectrum SPF 30 prevents new ones. At bedtime, Fade Gel 4 with hydroquinone, glycolic and salicylic acids, and licorice extract removes and fades surface pigment cells.

**WHAT AN EXPERT SAYS:** "The Parsol sunscreen is good, because it blocks most UVA rays, which cause dark spots," says Leslie Baumann, assistant professor of dermatology at the University of Miami. "Licorice and kojic acid do lighten the skin, and AHAs and BHAs make dark spots go away faster. This kit is safe and would work for women with melasma and dark spots from acne, along with people who just want to lighten and brighten their skin. But the fade gel is weak compared to what you would get with a prescription product—most have 4 percent hydroquinone. After the dark spots fade, it would make sense to go back to using standard anti-aging skin-care products."

## All Systems Go



▲ Neutrogena Healthy Skin Radiance



▲ Clean & Clear Advantage



▲ DDF Hyperpigmentation Kit



▲ Prescriptives Super Line Corrector



▲ Dove Sensitive Essentials



▲ Erno Laszlo Ritual for Normal Skin

**WHAT WE SAY:** Friends told us our skin looked brighter, and it does. After 30 days, our brown spots hadn't faded much, but we love the brightening cleanser.

**COST:** \$59 for the kit.

**WHAT IT IS:** Prescriptives Super Line Corrector.

**WHY:** Women tend to attack lines and wrinkles with a little too much zeal, smothering the skin with oily serums and creams. Prescriptives offers a simple, three-product regimen comprising enzymes, plant extracts, and rich moisturizers. When used twice daily, the Smoothing Cleanser, Lifting Day Cream, and Firming Night Cream offer short- and long-term results, improving firmness by 39 percent and reducing lines by 45 percent after eight weeks, according to the company's own tests.

**HOW IT WORKS:** Echinacea helps strengthen skin cells, increasing their ability to generate collagen; frankincense reduces inflammation, inhibiting the breakdown of elastin; pro-ceramide, a yeast extract, has been shown in independent studies to shrink tiny capillaries (like those around the nose); and vitamin E helps prevent photodamage.

**WHAT AN EXPERT SAYS:** "By improving the immunity of skin cells with echinacea, you may help prevent the breakdown of collagen," says Wexler, who stops short of agreeing with claims that the ingredient *generates* collagen. "Frankincense has antibacterial properties, so it would probably be anti-inflammatory as well. We've seen that antioxidants can reduce UV damage, and there are studies showing that certain enzymes can repair DNA. Also, the white birch in the day and night creams is often used to even pigmentation, so that will also help make the skin look younger."

**WHAT WE SAY:** This system took less time than our previous cobbled-together one. The day cream didn't feel very rich, but it did make our skin feel firmer for a few hours. The night cream was an excellent moisturizer.

**COST:** Smoothing Cleanser, \$25; Day Cream, \$65; Night Cream, \$65.

**WHAT IT IS:** Dove Sensitive Essentials.

**WHY:** Sensitive skin is easily agitated. Dove's system forgoes ingredients that

## Assaulting the skin with ten superstrength ingredients can leave the face irritated.

strip in favor of fatty acid-rich seed oils, ceramides (a protective substance produced by the body that holds cells together), and oat-kernel extracts, which help the skin cells repair themselves.

**HOW IT WORKS:** "The main goal when cleansing sensitive skin is first do no harm," says Michael Cheney, director of global skin care for Dove. While traditional cleansers rely on emulsifiers that remove fatty acids from the epidermis, Dove's versions (either a foaming wash, tissue-off lotion, or towelettes) gently dissolve dirt and surface oil without disrupting the skin's lipid layer. To calm and prevent inflammation, the day and night moisturizers have chamomile and licorice extracts, along with a fatty acid called PPAR, which improves wound healing, according to a Swiss study in the *Journal of Cellular Biology*.

**WHAT AN EXPERT SAYS:** "This is one of the best examples of a line where the products really are formulated to work together," Baumann says. "First, the cream cleanser contains fatty acids that are deposited on the skin, then you add the ceramides and cholesterol through the moisturizers. Studies show that when you put these ingredients together, they do a superb job of hydrating the skin. But this is definitely best for dry-skinned people—not for those who are prone to breakouts."

**WHAT WE SAY:** The foaming wash is sudsy but not harsh. The day and night creams are rich but not greasy. Our skin feels soft and is less flushed. Still, we wish this system could somehow contain anti-aging ingredients. And there's no SPF, even in the day moisturizer.

**COST:** Foaming Cleanser, \$4.99; Non-Foaming Cleanser, \$4.99; Cleansing Towelettes, \$4.99; Day Lotion, \$6.99; Day Cream, \$6.99; Night Cream, \$6.99.

**WHAT IT IS:** Erno Laszlo Ritual for Normal Skin.

**WHY:** Erno Laszlo classifies skin into seven categories, from extremely dry to extremely oily, and each type has a different six-step ritual. The company's aim is to make skin smoother and reduce pore size through deep cleaning, hot-water rinsing, and massage.

**HOW IT WORKS:** Erno Laszlo's cleansing process remains the same as it always was: an all-over swab of Active pHelityl Oil (a combination of noncomedogenic sesame, macadamia, and grape-seed oils to loosen dead skin cells), topped with a layer of vitamin-rich Sea Mud Soap, which is rinsed off with exactly 30 splashes of hot water. The Light Controlling Lotion, a nonalcohol toner, removes residue, and the Timeless Skin Age Preventive Treatment serum hydrates. It contains antioxidant vitamin C, exfoliating salicylic acid, and high-powered moisturizers called glycosaminoglycans, which reduce the appearance of spider veins and redness, according to independent research. The pHelityl Lotion SPF 15 (in the morning) and the pHelityl Cream (at night) add more moisture to the skin. The Skin Normalizer Shake It is part foundation, part treatment, with a light dose of citric acid to break down dead skin cells.

**WHAT AN EXPERT SAYS:** "The ingredients are all very good—antioxidants have been shown to reverse damage to the skin, the salicylic acid will definitely deep-clean pores, and the glycosaminoglycans will, at the very least, plump up the skin and decrease pore size temporarily," Wexler says. "But this system is pushing the envelope with the number of products. The less you do to disrupt normal skin, the better."

**WHAT WE SAY:** At first, we had to tape the directions to our bathroom wall to recall all the steps. And after applying so many products (a process that took us 10 minutes), our skin sometimes felt overloaded. But the morning application of Shake It left our skin more balanced and looking cleaner and smoother.

**COST:** pHelityl Oil, \$36; Sea Mud Soap, \$32; Controlling Lotion, \$32; Timeless Skin treatment, \$78; pHelityl Lotion, \$57; pHelityl Cream, \$62; Skin Normalizer Shake It, \$38. ♦