

How to Use Topical Retinoid Medications

DERM101

How to start

Topical retinoid-containing medications can initially cause skin irritation (redness, flaking, burning) in many individuals. Proper use of the medication, as well as other strategies, can reduce the risk of irritation and minimize skin dryness.

It is essential to start by using the medication twice a week, slowly increasing the frequency of use to daily or every other day. Increasing the frequency by one additional day per week is a conservative approach, as the presentation of skin irritation can be delayed by several days after application of the medication. Ideally, medication should be applied once daily. Use the medication at night.

How to apply

1. Wash the skin with cool or lukewarm water. Do not use hot water.
2. Cleanse the skin with prescribed cleanser or gentle cleanser. Pat skin dry.
3. Wait 20 minutes before applying medication.
4. Apply a pea-sized amount of medication to the entire face by dotting it around the face and then gently connecting the dots with your fingertips. Avoid application near the eyes and lips, as this can cause irritation and scaling. It is not necessary to rub it in vigorously.
5. If you are experiencing mild irritation or dryness, you may try the following strategies to minimize irritation:
 - Decrease the frequency of use
 - Wash the medication off after 1 hour of use (consult your doctor first)
 - Apply a noncomedogenic moisturizer after 1 hour of use
6. Avoid astringents and abrasive products.
7. If you experience severe irritation, discontinue its use and wait until the irritation completely resolves before restarting the medication. Consult your doctor if you are uncertain whether it is safe to restart the medication.

Important information regarding topical retinoids

Note that acne often flares during the first month of using some topical retinoid medications. This is a common side effect of some topical retinoids and usually resolves within 3-4 weeks of continuous use.

Topical retinoid medications often make the skin more sensitive to sun. It is recommended that you use a noncomedogenic sunscreen during the day while on topical retinoid therapy.

Retinoid medications are not recommended for use during pregnancy. It is important to discontinue use as soon as pregnancy is confirmed, and to consult your dermatologist and/or obstetrician if you are currently using retinoid medication and are considering becoming pregnant in the near future.

Notes from your doctor: