Is your face too clean?

Photographs
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Thanks to the internet, The Ordinary and Korea's bazillion-step regimes, we've become a generation of skincare junkies and bacteria-phobes. But is our obsession with cleanliness counter-productive? ›

For some, it started in secondary school with a certain apricot face scrub. For others, it was more recent, with the rise of so-called "glass skin" and Glossier girl close-ups blocking our feeds. Have you noticed just how preoccupied we are with the state of our faces? It's no accident. The internet, along with hyper-educational beauty brands, has brought skincare smarts to the masses. Nowadays we're *all* off-duty dermatologists. Couple that with the panicky rise of anti-pollution cosmetics – not to mention constant pressure to be selfie-ready at the drop of a dermaroller – and it's no wonder we're obsessed with acids, charcoal peels, scrubs and anything promising the far-off wonder of "purified" skin. And with acne, rosacea, dermatitis, eczema and general irritation on the rise, it's easy to be seduced into trying to scrub away the oil and bacteria we've always been taught are so goddamn disruptive to skin health.

But while there's little harm in Marie Kondo-ing our homes and Mrs Hinch-ing our kitchens, the same can't be said for our stressed-out faces, which are now feeling the burn from our triple-cleansing and 12-step skin rituals. Enough is enough. Our overactive cleanliness might not only be causing irritation – it could also be damaging our skin barrier. We need to call time on deep cleaning done wrong.

Damage control

Whenever you go too far with the scrubs and acids, you wear away the vital, uppermost layer of your skin – the barrier. Your skin's barrier is like the non-stick coating on your favourite pan. Nobody's denying that it's important to keep that pan clean and hygienic, and with the right care and attention, it'll last you a lifetime. But if you don't clean it correctly – or worse, over-clean it – you'll end up eroding its protective seal. When it comes to skin, this can result in itchy redness, rawness, and stingy sensations when you apply skincare or make-up. Unlike on your kitchenware, sometimes a little grease and bacteria on your face is a good thing.



The fix

Luckily, your skin barrier can be restored quite easily with a tasty combination of bacteria and grease. You can keep levels of healthy bacteria (probiotics) topped up by misting your face with prebiotics (which keep the "good" bacteria well-fed) and post-biotics (which are, essentially, bacteria manure – fibrous nutrients that "good" bacteria like to snack on) that build and protect your barrier. Along with classic mists, these ingredients are also available in many cleansers, moisturisers and serums.

Topping up the "grease" part of your regime (experts call this "maintaining your lipid ratio") is also an essential stage, and one which has been championed for decades – and it is especially relevant in a post-Kylie-Walnut-Scrub era. Greasing up that skin barrier is equally simple – to start, just look out for the word "ceramide". If skin cells are bricks, ceramides are the mortar. The peanut butter in your bagel. The Mel C in your Spice Girls reunion – you get the picture: ceramides hold the whole thing together, creating a fortress against the outside world. Once a pricey ingredient only for the rich and famous, they can now be obtained for less than the price of a Nandos, and inform every step of your skincare regime, from cleanser to lip balm to SPF. Also look out for omega fatty acids and cholesterol – all wonder ingredients for replenishing your skin. A regime that combines those bacteria and grease elements can restore your skin barrier in a matter of days, making your face hydrated, brighter, and better able to tolerate pollution, dirt and active skincare ingredients like AHAs/BHAs and retinoids.

The moral of the story? Cleaning your face is not a one-size-fits-all scenario. Different skin types tolerate and want for different things, and the quest for ideal skin will and *should* take each of us down a slightly separate path. We can't all live in the house of Hinch – and that's totally fine. You need to tailor your regime to your skin type at every step – *including* cleansing. Here's how to do it…

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YOUR SKIN BARRIER PRESCRIPTION

My skin's looking kind of…

Dehydrated ☐

THE SITUATION: "The skin on my face is duller than a desk lunch..."
YOU'RE PROBABLY: Trying to exfoliate away the dullness with acid toners and distract with glow drops and highlighters.
THE SOLUTION: Your face needs a tall glass of water, stat. **Aveeno Dermexa Daily Emollient Cream, £9.99,** is full of ceramide, plus glycerine and panthenol to help your skin grip on to water. Air-con drying you out? Decant **Boots Traditional Skin Care Glycerin & Rosewater, £2.39,** into a spritz bottle and mist over make-up. In short? Chill out on the exfoliation.



Dry ☐

THE SITUATION: "My face is scaly, flaky and itchy. I'm not even *trying* to get my base make-up to sit right."
YOU'RE PROBABLY: Not washing in case you sacrifice what oil your skin has.
THE SOLUTION: *Do* cleanse – but the right way. Use **CeraVe Hydrating Cleanser, £9,** followed by **Kate Somerville Kx Active Concentrates Omegas + Ceramides Barrier Defense Serum, £84.** Tight budget? Try **Superdrug Simply Pure Hydrating Serum, £2.99.** Then balance bacteria with **Esse Ultra Moisturiser, £55.**



Oily ☐

THE SITUATION: "Shiny and oily, my skin is a spot-prone nightmare."
YOU'RE PROBABLY: Jet-washing your face and terrified of moisturisers.
THE SOLUTION: First, deploy **Too Faced Hangover Good In Bed Ultra-Replenishing Hydrating Serum, £29,** for its probiotic, antioxidant-rich goodness. Work past your moisturiser issues with **Paula's Choice Clear Oil-Free Moisturiser, £27** (it has niacinamide to keep break-outs in check), or **Bioderma Sébium Hydra, £11.50.**



Overworked ☐

THE SITUATION: "Removing my SPF and high-coverage foundation is a full-time job, before I even start on my skincare regime."
YOU'RE PROBABLY: Quadruple-cleansing, multi-masking and feeling the sting.
THE SOLUTION: Relax – we won't take away your multi-step ritual, but you need to add barrier-replenishing ingredients. Cleanse with **Murad Probiotic 4-in-1 MultiCleanser, £38.** Swap super-active masks for **YourGoodSkin's Cica Repair Sleep Paste, £12,** which is packed with fatty acids and antioxidants. And if you're wedded to nightly retinol, opt for **Elizabeth Arden Retinol Ceramide Capsules, £42 for 30.**



Inflamed ☐

THE SITUATION: "Painful, extra-sensitive and blemish-ridden, my skin's just awful."
YOU'RE PROBABLY: Panicking.
THE SOLUTION: You definitely need to see a dermatologist. For now, stick to a gently antimicrobial, antibacterial cleanser such as **Dermalogica Ultracalming Cleanser, £33.** The omega-packed **SVR Topialyse Balm Spray, £15,** could help too, feeding good bacteria with prebiotic sugar. You could also slather on **Epionce's Medical Barrier Cream, £29.50.** Full of fatty acids and ceramide precursors, it's intended for use after aggressive treatments so you should have a barrier back in no time. ◆

