

Caring for a Healthy Skin Barrier

The wall between you and everything else — and how to keep it intact

Every product you use either builds up your skin barrier or breaks it down — there's not much middle ground. Here's what the barrier actually is, what wears it thin, and what the research says actually helps rebuild it.

01

THE BRICK-AND-MORTAR WALL

The outermost layer of skin works like a brick wall: flattened skin cells act as the bricks, and a lipid matrix of ceramides, cholesterol, and free fatty acids fills the gaps between them as mortar. Together, this structure does two jobs at once — it keeps water from evaporating out, and keeps irritants, allergens, and pathogens from getting in.

THE MORTAR, BY WEIGHT

Ceramides · Cholesterol · Free fatty acids — present in roughly equal parts in healthy skin

Getting started: when any one of these three lipids runs low, the wall gets gaps — not evenly, but wherever that particular lipid is missing.

02

WHAT ACTUALLY WEARS IT DOWN

Over-exfoliation, harsh sulfate cleansers, hot water, over-washing, and heavy use of actives like retinoids or acids all strip lipids faster than skin can replace them. The result has a name: transepidermal water loss (TEWL) — water escaping through the gaps in the wall faster than it should, which is what shows up as tightness, flaking, or sensitivity.

GETTING STARTED

If a cleanser leaves skin feeling squeaky-tight, it likely stripped more than it needed to — clean skin shouldn't feel dry.

03

REBUILDING THE MORTAR, NOT JUST ADDING WATER

Research on barrier repair creams found something specific: applying ceramides, cholesterol, or fatty acids alone — or even just two of the three together — actually delays barrier recovery compared to using all three together. Only the complete combination lets skin rebuild its natural lamellar structure properly.

GETTING STARTED

Look for moisturizers listing ceramides, cholesterol, and fatty acids together, not just one on its own — the combination is what the research supports, not any single ingredient in isolation.

EXFOLIATION: HELPFUL UNTIL IT ISN'T

Gentle exfoliation clears away built-up dead skin cells and can help other products absorb better. But exfoliating too often, or combining multiple acids and scrubs in the same routine, removes the very bricks and mortar the barrier depends on — trading short-term glow for longer-term sensitivity.

SIGNS YOU'VE OVERDONE IT

Stinging from products that never used to sting, visible redness, tightness, or skin that suddenly reacts to things it tolerated before.

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This is general educational information, not medical advice. Persistent redness, cracking, or a rash that doesn't improve with gentler products may signal a skin condition worth seeing a dermatologist about, rather than something to treat with more products.