

increase the absorption of any acid that's applied. "We can use that to our advantage," says Fusco, "but it can change the amount of time you leave the peel on." The good news is that a peel can boost the effectiveness of medications, including Retin-A. Afterward, the outer layer of dead skin is gone, so moisturizers and medications penetrate deeper "until that outer layer of dead cells builds back up," Weinkle says. Depending on the strength of the peel, that effect can last from a few days to a few months.

Q I have lots of dark brown spots from sun exposure, but I don't want one of those extreme peels that turns your face into a scab.

Can I get a series of mild ones instead?

You probably need a medium peel, which goes to the middle layers of the skin to treat dark spots or wrinkles. "No matter how many lighter peels you do, they won't equal a medium peel," says Day. And despite their name, medium peels—which

cost between \$500 and \$1,000—are anything but moderate. After numbing the surface of the skin, a doctor will apply a 35 to 50 percent concentration of trichloroacetic acid (TCA). Because this acid penetrates the dermis—the living tissue of the face—the process can be so painful that many doctors prescribe Valium for before and painkillers for afterward, and patients will need seven to ten days to recover. Skin will be red and tight until scabs form. These will then fall off, and skin will be pink and in need of extra sun protection for several weeks.

Many doctors are wary of medium peels because they can go seriously awry if not performed well, so make sure that your dermatologist has done a number of TCA peels before you book one. But as bad as this all sounds, plenty of women continue to choose medium peels because they have such a transformative effect. Though they require a time commitment of two weeks, they can erase years of significant sun damage—including precancerous growths.

Q Are peels going to exist in ten years? All my doctor talks about are lasers.

Yes. "Mild peels are quick and effective," Graf says.

That said, some patients are choosing fractional laser treatments in place of a medium peel. "Everyone wants to go deeper with less recovery time," says Lawrence Bass, codirector of the Center for Minimally Invasive Plastic Surgery at the New York University School of Medicine. Instead of removing an entire layer of skin, fractional lasers—like the Fraxel—zap pinpointed spots and leave the surrounding tissue undamaged, which helps the affected skin heal faster. Patients often have swelling and redness for three days, though deeper treatments may cause blistering. The catch? It takes two to five sessions for an effect similar to that of one medium peel—at \$1,000 to \$1,500 a pop. "Adopting the Fraxel increased the number of medium peels I do," Bass says. "People listen to their options and decide, 'I want to do it just once.'" ♦

Acid Test

New home peels won't perform magic, but they also won't cause ugly side effects. We tested each and asked New York City dermatologist Amy B. Lewis to evaluate.

—LIANA SCHAFFNER

PRODUCT	THE CLAIM	THE EXPERT SAYS	WE SAY
Arcona Kiwi Clarifying Peel 	Speeds cell turnover and collagen production to increase skin's clarity and smoothness; also contains the antioxidant ferulic acid to protect skin.	"This would help lighten sun spots or uneven pigmentation. Ferulic acid is a great antioxidant, so this would prevent future damage."	This peel smelled and looked like a kiwi smoothie, but it stung our sensitive skin a bit. Our boyfriend told us we looked good afterward.
 DermaDoctor Physical Chemistry Microdermabrasion + Multiacid peel	The high concentration of acids (19.5 percent) promotes cell renewal and retexturizes dull and discolored skin, while beads gently remove dead cells.	"This is a great peel with chemical and manual components to improve skin's tone and texture. The beads help the acids penetrate better."	The beads dissolved almost instantly. Our skin looked clearer and smoother after just two uses, and it seemed to make our moisturizer sink in better.
Prescriptives Instant Gratification Skin Renewal Peel 	The self-heating treatment combines glycolic acid with microdermabrasion beads, immediately improving radiance, clarity, and smoothness.	"The self-heating mechanism draws circulation to the area and creates a flushed, healthy glow. Skin will look brighter after a single use."	The heat was relaxing, but the texture was a little grainy and harsh. Our skin did feel softer and look brighter—but results lasted for less than an hour.
DDF Ultra-Lite Peel 	This leave-on serum has salicylic acid, arginine glycolate, elm extract, and camellia japonica to slough away dead cells while hydrating skin.	"There's a low concentration of salicylic acid. This won't produce dramatic results, but the elm extract is good for both dry and acne-prone skin."	This sticky serum formed a smooth seal, making our face feel tight. When we washed it off in the morning, our skin felt cleaner and softer.
Skin Amnesty At-Home Peel Kit 	Multifruit acids exfoliate and clarify skin while stimulating collagen and elastin. The kit also has a neutralizer and a 60-second timer.	"This has a lot of alcohol, as well as salicylic acid, which dry skin out. I would suggest it for spot treatments, for which the roll-on applicator is suited."	The astringent smell and gluey texture reminded us of teenage acne goop. The roll-on was easy, and our skin looked clearer, but our face did feel dry in places.