The Ingredient *Decoder*

Twenty buzzwords in plain English: what they actually do, how good the evidence is, and when they're worth paying for.

BUZZWORDS

20

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THE 60-SECOND VERSION

Pay for proof, not the story.

- The ingredients with the **most proof are mostly the cheap ones**: retinoids, niacinamide, vitamin C, acids, ceramides.
- The ones with the **best stories** (PDRN, NAD+, exosomes, collagen creams) have the **least proof** in a jar.
- Paying more can buy you a **gentler, more stable formula**. It doesn't buy a different molecule.

SOLID

Good human research. If it fits your goal, it's worth buying.

PROMISING

Real, but early or modest. Fine to try. Not worth a big premium.

THIN

A great story with very little proof in a jar. Don't pay extra for it.

IF YOU ONLY BUY WHAT'S SOLID

Aging:
a retinoid at night, vitamin C in the morning, SPF daily.

Breakouts:
salicylic acid or benzoyl peroxide, plus a simple moisturizer.

Redness + dark marks:
niacinamide or azelaic acid.

Dry or irritated:
ceramides + hyaluronic acid, and pause the actives.

A NOTE ON PRICE

I love some professional-line products, and I'll pay for them. When I do, I'm paying for a formula that's gentler on my barrier and actually stable, not for a fancier molecule. That's the question to ask before any splurge.

The ones that *earn their spot.*

Retinoids retinol, retinal

SOLID

What it is: vitamin A. Your skin converts retinol to retinal to retinoic acid, the form that works. Retinal is one step closer, so it works at lower amounts.

What it does: smoother texture, softer fine lines, faded spots. Over months, not days.

Worth paying for? A good one doesn't have to cost much. More money buys a gentler formula. Start 2 nights a week. Pregnant or trying? Skip it and ask your doctor.

Niacinamide vitamin B3

SOLID

What it does: in a 12-week split-face trial, 5% improved fine lines, texture, spots and redness. Also helps your barrier and oil.

Worth paying for? No. 2 to 5% is plenty and it's in $6 to $15 serums. And yes, it's fine with vitamin C. That old rule is a myth.

Vitamin C L-ascorbic acid

SOLID

What it does: antioxidant. Brightens dark spots and backs up your sunscreen. Mostly studied at 10 to 20%.

Worth paying for? Sometimes. It breaks down fast, so stable formulas and dark, airless packaging matter. Turned orange or brown? It's done.

Salicylic acid BHA

SOLID

What it does: oil-soluble, so it gets into pores. Blackheads, clogged pores, breakouts. Usually 0.5 to 2%.

Worth paying for? No. Cheap works great.

AHAs glycolic, lactic, mandelic

SOLID

What it does: loosens dead skin on the surface. Texture, dullness, spots. Mandelic is a bigger molecule, so it's gentler. All of them make you more sun sensitive.

Worth paying for? Mid-price is fine. Don't stack it with a retinoid on the same night while you're starting out.

Benzoyl peroxide

SOLID

What it does: kills acne bacteria. Boring and it works. Lower strengths like 2.5% are often enough and easier on your skin.

Worth paying for? No. Drugstore. Use white towels, because it bleaches fabric.

Azelaic acid

SOLID

What it does: redness, bumps and dark marks, and gentle enough for a lot of sensitive skin. Around 10% over the counter; higher strengths need a prescription.

Worth paying for? Modestly. It's underrated.

Ceramides

SOLID

What it is: fats that are naturally part of your skin barrier. They work best alongside cholesterol and fatty acids.

Worth paying for? Not much. Barrier repair shouldn't cost a fortune.

Hyaluronic acid

SOLID*

What it does: holds water, so skin looks plumper for a while. *Solid for hydration. It doesn't rebuild anything. Put it on damp skin and seal it in with moisturizer.

Worth paying for? No. It costs pennies to make.

Tranexamic acid

PROMISING

What it does: fades dark spots and stubborn discoloration. Topical studies are small but encouraging. I'm testing a few right now, so I'll report back.

Worth paying for? Mid-price, and give it at least 8 to 12 weeks.

The ones with *great marketing.*

Peptides incl. "Botox in a bottle"

PROMISING

What it does: some signal peptides have small studies showing modest softening of fine lines. Argireline, the "Botox in a bottle" one, has small, short studies, and nothing on your skin relaxes a muscle like an injection.

Worth paying for? Nice as a supporting player. Not worth a big premium on its own.

Growth factors

PROMISING

What it does: proteins that tell skin to repair. Real research in wound healing, and a lot of estheticians (me included) like them, especially around treatments. How stable they are and how deep they get varies a lot by formula.

Who should skip: anyone with a cancer history, psoriasis, or high skin-cancer risk. Ask your doctor first.

Bakuchiol

PROMISING

What it does: the plant "retinol alternative." One 12-week trial of 44 people found results similar to 0.5% retinol with less irritation. Promising, but one small study.

Worth paying for? Not a premium.

Centella asiatica cica

PROMISING

What it does: soothing and calming. Decent lab data, smaller human studies.

Worth paying for? No. Plenty of affordable K-beauty options.

Caffeine

PROMISING

What it does: temporarily de-puffs. Big asterisk: no topical can really fix dark circles or puffiness. Most of the time it's something underneath, like sleep, allergies, or what your labs would show.

Worth paying for? No. Cheap is fine.

PDRN "salmon DNA"

THIN

What it does: injected, it has wound-healing research. In a cream there's very little proof. The injection and the jar are being sold as the same thing, and they're not.

Worth paying for? Don't pay extra for it.

NAD+

THIN

What it does: real inside your cells, but the molecule is too big to get through skin well, and human trials on skin basically don't exist. Its precursor, niacinamide, has real trials.

Worth paying for? Buy niacinamide instead.

Collagen in creams

THIN

What it does: too big to get in and rebuild your collagen. On your skin, it's a moisturizer. (Collagen you drink is a different story, with modest research.)

Worth paying for? Moisturizer prices only.

Exosomes

THIN

What it does: tiny particles cells use to send signals. The buzzword of the year. Evidence in skincare is early, and no exosome product is FDA-approved.

Worth paying for? Wait and see.

Snail mucin

THIN

What it does: a nice, hydrating, slightly slimy texture. Studies are small and often brand-funded.

Worth paying for? If you love the feel, it's a fine moisturizer step.

When the next buzzword drops, *I'll decode it.*

That's what my free newsletter, The Unbothered Edit, is for: honest verdicts on the ingredients and products everyone's talking about.

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