



## WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT OVER THE COUNTER MOISTURIZERS

BY MOLLY WANNER, MD, MBA

We have natural moisturizers in our skin. These moisturizers form a protective layer and attract water from deep in the body to keep our skin hydrated. In fact, moisturizers that we buy mimic the moisturizers that we have naturally. Is this extra expense necessary?

### Do we need to moisturize?

For many people, the answer is yes. Our day to day lives can decrease our natural moisturizer. Simply aging lowers our moisturizer. Sun and wind wear down our natural protection. Frequent travel can alter skin moisture. Aggressive cleansing breaks down our natural moisturizers. Some medications can deplete moisturizers. Some people, such as those with eczema, naturally have lower levels of moisturizer. We can control some, but not all, of these factors.

### What is a moisturizer?

Moisturizers contain ingredients called “occlusives” that create a layer of extra protection over the skin. Examples of occlusives are petrolatum, lanolin, mineral oil, dimethicone, and beeswax. These ingredients are the most moisturizing.

Other ingredients are called “emollients.” These moisturizers slide between skin cells to help seal the skin against water loss. Examples of emollients are cholesterol, squalene, olive oil, and jojoba oil.

Some moisturizers have “humectants” as such as glycerin, alpha hydroxyl acid, sorbitol, and urea that pull water into the outer layer of the skin. Many products have some combination of occlusives, emollients, and humectants. If a moisturizer only contained humectants, it would pull the water to the outer layer of the skin and cause water loss.

### Which moisturizer is “the best”?

The best choice for one person may not be the best choice for another. An older person with dry skin may need a cream, while a younger person may need a lotion or gel. The best choice may vary with the seasons. Thicker creams are often better in the winter. A moisturizer with salicylic acid may help one person and irritate another. Some people, such as those with rosacea, may need sensitive skin product lines.

### What are some common ingredients in moisturizers?

**Salicylic acid** is part of the aspirin family. Salicylic acid helps acne sufferers because it can penetrate through oil, exfoliate

the skin, and unclog pores. It is also used to decrease brown spots and help with fine lines. The ability to exfoliate the skin may decrease natural moisturizers, and lower doses may be needed for dry skin.

**Vitamin C** is an antioxidant. Antioxidants protect against sun damage. To mobilize this antioxidant effect, Vitamin C should be used prior to sun exposure. Vitamin C may help with fine lines and brown spots. To ensure that Vitamin C is functioning, this ingredient should be in a dark container with a small opening.



**Niacinamide** is a type of Vitamin B, and it may help treat acne, brown spots, and fine lines. Unlike salicylic acid, which thins the skin, it can increase the thickness of the skin barrier, so skin stays more hydrated. Niacinamide is a good choice for those with sensitive skin.

**Retinol** is a type of Vitamin A that may help with fine lines and brown spots. Like Vitamin C, it should be packaged in a dark container with a small opening, or it may not function. Sunlight can break down retinol, so it should be used at night.

**Feverfew** is derived from a plant. It is an antioxidant and an anti-inflammatory that is used in products that calm the skin.

It is important to know that over the counter products are considered cosmetic. This means that they affect the appearance of brown spots or fine lines and may not permanently remove these problem areas.