

The holy trinity of a teenager's skincare routine: cleanser, moisturizer, & SPF

It's easy to get lost among endless aisles furnished by even more endless skincare products. From unpronounceable ingredients to elaborate stories of eleven-step celebrity skincare routines, skincare can seem confusing and unapproachable.

But there's no need to despair – this article details the three essential products anyone can incorporate into their routine. Bear in mind, good skincare routines are simple, suited to your skin concerns, and affordable for your budget. Start with these, and see where it takes you.

Begin with the cleanser. Cleansers – as the name suggests – washes away the accumulated dirt and sweat that builds on your face throughout the day. In essence, a good cleanser should rinse away the acne-causing impurities on your face: sweat, clogged pores, and dirt – and leave your face refreshed and ready to be moisturized. Generally, you *should* cleanse at night. But cleansing during the morning or just splashing your face with water is a matter of personal preference.

Common accessible cleansers include the Vanicream Gentle Facial Cleanser, COSRX Low pH Good Morning Gel Cleanser, or lines by Cetaphil, CeraVe, or Neutrogena. When choosing a cleanser, pay attention to how your skin feels *after* cleansing – does it feel dry or tight? Or nourished and clean? Pay attention to the texture and if *you* personally like it. If you have extremely oily skin or struggle with pimples, look into a low concentration of salicylic acid or benzoyl peroxide, such as Neutrogena's Neutrogena Stubborn Texture Daily Acne Facial Cleanser.

You should not use hand soap. Or dish soap. Or shampoo, like our lovely Editor-in-Chief does.

Second, the moisturizer. After washing away oil and dirt, you've probably also washed away a great deal of moisture, leaving your skin dry and bare. This is where a moisturizer comes in! A good moisturizer restores hydration to your face by helping your skin absorb and retain water.

It's inadvisable to skip this step just because you have oily skin – instead, apply a thin layer of moisturizer suitable for oily skin. If you don't moisturize, your skin can become oilier to compensate for the lack of hydration.

Popular drugstore moisturizers include Cetaphil's line of moisturizers that vary by skin type, or Aveeno's Daily Moisturizing Lotion. Again, look for a moisturizer that leaves your skin feeling hydrated overnight and throughout the day.

And finally, sunscreen: the most overlooked skincare step. A quality SPF (broad spectrum 15 minimum) should protect your skin from damaging UV rays, which can penetrate your skin and delay healing, cause dark spots, and exacerbate scarring. Indeed, a [literature review](#) published in the Journal of Cosmetic Dermatology found that UV light is linked to post-inflammatory hyperpigmentation (or post-zit redness) and can initiate acne flares.

Look for a broad-spectrum SPF 15+ sunscreen that protects you from both UVA and UVB rays. Acceptable ways to wear SPF may be through moisturizers, makeup, or by itself (in sunscreen). However, SPF should be reapplied every ninety minutes if you're outside in the sun. Over time, oils secreted from the skin degrade the efficacy of sunscreen. SPF shouldn't only be worn on beach or pool days – if you'll be out in direct sunlight for a long time, wear it. Where moisturizing and cleansing should be done night and day, SPF should only be applied in the daytime.

The most important thing when selecting an SPF is how much you personally enjoy the texture and feel of it. Choose an SPF that you won't mind reapplying in generous amounts.

However, white casts are a common deterrent for wearing sunscreen regularly – in which case, I recommend sunscreens by Korean or Japanese brands, including Beauty of Joseon, Shiseido, or SKIN 1004. Popular drugstore brands include Vanicream and Neutrogena's Invisible Daily Defense SPF 60.

In review, a quality skincare routine involves cleansing and moisturizing at night, while cleansing, moisturizing, and applying SPF in the daytime. There's a common misconception that more expensive, fancier brands are better than cheap drugstore options (looking at you, Sephora and Ulta). But common household brand names such as Neutrogena, Cetaphil, Cerave, and Vanicream have the funds and incentives to pour far greater resources into R&D and consumer safety. Go for the products that you can afford and enjoy.

After establishing a solid foundation for your skincare routine for *several weeks*, you can consider adding in fancy stuff: serums, toners, essences, ampoules, etc. Similarly, avoid trying new skincare "hacks" or powerful active ingredients *until* you've established a base for your skincare routine.

A solid routine goes a long way for addressing skin concerns even before using active ingredients.

Feel free to reach out to me on Instagram @austinmengg with specific questions – but bear in mind that I am not *yet* a dermatologist.

Image caption: Image courtesy of Content Pixie via Unsplash.