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## The Dos and Don'ts of Incorporating Hydroquinone Into Your Skin-Care Routine

Dermatologists share exactly what you should and shouldn't do to make the controversial, skin-lightening ingredient work in your favor.



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*Do you start group chats about the best scalp treatments? Google AHA vs. BHA exfoliants until the wee hours? You're our people. And we know you're going to love **The Science of Beauty**, a series on Allure.com that goes deep into the how and why behind your favorite products. For even more nerdiness, check out **The Science of Beauty podcast**, produced by our editors.*



**Hydroquinone** is the LeBron James of skin care. The skin lightener is as controversial as it is effective. When incorporated into your complexion regimen properly, hydroquinone decreases the production of melanin by inhibiting tyrosinase, an enzyme needed for melanin production, to **decrease the appearance of hyperpigmentation**. Because of this, many people consider it to be a skin-bleaching ingredient. According to Miami-based board-certified dermatologist **Roberta Del Campo**, it should be considered a "color blender" instead.

Things can go wrong (namely, a rare, unwanted side effect called exogenous ochronosis, "which is a paradoxical darkening of the treated skin," Louisiana-based board-certified dermatologist **Mamina Turegano** tells *Allure*) if you don't meticulously follow **the dos and don'ts of hydroquinone**, though.

Plus, the ingredient has been banned in Europe since 2001 on account of studies finding evidence of carcinogenicity in rodents when hydroquinone was orally administered. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) took this into account and still deemed hydroquinone safe for topical application because not enough clear evidence of the risk outweighing the benefits exists. Dermatologists also are still willing to prescribe it to their patients.

Needless to say, we felt compelled to ask board-certified dermatologists to walk us through exactly what you need to do with the **melasma remedy** for it to be a safe, beneficial part of your skin-care routine.

## **DO** consult your dermatologist first

Before implementing hydroquinone into your lineup, ask your dermatologist if it's truly right for your skin tone and complexion concerns. Although it is suitable for all skin types, Turegano is cautious when recommending the ingredient to those with **dry and sensitive skin** because of the irritation it can cause. She's also wary of those with **deeper skin tones** incorporating hydroquinone into their skin-care routines because the risk of exogenous ochronosis is higher than those with fairer complexions. Hydro isn't off the table in these cases, but caution and close monitoring is needed.



## DON'T use hydroquinone for too long

A major key to hydroquinone is **short-term use**. You can slather it on twice daily for at least six weeks (and no more than six months). After one to three months, you should start to see your hyperpigmentation fade away. At the three-month mark, you should set it aside. "Once you have achieved your desired results, stop using hydroquinone daily and only use it if the hyperpigmentation reappears," says **Aegean Chan**, a board-certified dermatologist based in Santa Barbara, California.

## DO wear (and reapply) sunscreen daily

Although **sun protection** is a given no matter what you're putting on your face, it's an essential worth stressing. Layering on **ample sunscreen** and diligently protecting your skin from UV exposure yields the best results with hydroquinone, Chan says.

## DON'T mix hydroquinone with these ingredients

Turegano and Chan both agree hydroquinone does not play well with **benzoyl peroxide**, hydrogen peroxide, or other peroxide products. Not only will pairing them cause irritation and dryness, but it can also temporarily stain your skin.

Because hydroquinone can cause irritation on its own, Chan also recommends avoiding other potentially irritating ingredients, such as **alpha hydroxy acids**, aka **AHAs**, including glycolic, lactic, and citric varieties.

## DON'T use hydroquinone if you're pregnant or breastfeeding

About to have a baby? Just gave birth and now nursing your bundle of joy? Well, hydroquinone isn't for you right now, Chan says. Studies haven't focused on the effects of hydroquinone absorption in pregnant or lactating people specifically, but "the absorption [into blood] via skin is about **35 to 45 percent**, which is quite high," she adds. "Although birth defects were not observed in rat fetuses exposed to high levels of hydroquinone, we don't have data in humans showing that it is demonstrably safe to use in pregnancy."

Thankfully, alternatives exist to **keep melasma** and **post-inflammatory hyperpigmentation** at bay. Ask your dermatologist about **tranexamic acid**, which New York City board-certified dermatologist **Y. Claire Chang** says is gentle, **pregnancy-safe**, and can be used long-term.



## DO take these product suggestions

Hydroquinone is available over the counter and with a prescription. The latter typically has a higher percentage and may be formulated with a retinoid and a topical steroid, Chan notes. Her favorite drugstore option for mild hyperpigmentation is the affordable [Ambi Skincare Fade Cream](#).

Connecticut-based board-certified dermatologist Mona Gohara is a fan of [Obagi's Medical Fx C-Clarifying Serum](#) for [treating her melasma](#), while Del Campo loves [Murad's Rapid Age Spot and Pigment Lightening Serum](#).

You can also obtain a prescription, custom-compounded dark spot formula without a trip to the dermatologist through [Agency](#), an option *Allure.com*'s beauty editor Devon Abelman swears by for clearing up her skin. Instead of smoothing it all over your skin, be sure to pinpoint exactly where you need it with a cotton swab.

As potent as this stuff is, you can be in control of how powerful it is by following these dos and don'ts to a T.

