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Why We've Got It All Wrong When It Comes To Exfoliating

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Go easy on the scrubbing. Image: Unsplash/Curology

There are few things more satisfying in this world than squeaky clean skin.

Somewhere along the line we decided that clean was the status quo, and set about scrubbing, squeezing and resurfacing our skin to within an inch of its dermis.

Although in case you missed the memo, you can have too much of a good thing, especially when it comes to grainy exfoliants which can tear away at the protective lipids and proteins that keep the skin hydrated, youthful and happy.

The other option, chemical exfoliation (which involves swiping on an acid from the Alpha Hydroxy Acid (AHAs) and Beta Hydroxy Acid (BHAs) families to break down the glue that holds the dead skin cells together allowing fresh new skin to come through) is less visually satisfying, but still a mainstay in many of our routines.



Not everything needs scrubbing. Image: Stocksy

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And theoretically, both manual and chemical exfoliants make sense. You use something abrasive on the surface and scrub off the top to find healthy, clear, smooth and glowing skin underneath, right? Well, according to one skincare expert, we shouldn't be doing either.

“Exfoliation is traumatic; it actually wounds the skin, dehydrates it and increases sun damage in the process. Your ‘dead skin’ barrier is highly purposeful,” explains Dr Ben Johnson, Osmosis Skincare founder.

“Most people think their aging skin is malfunctioning when its turnover rate slows, however the slowdown of the skin is intentional.”

Similar to how our metabolism slows when we don't eat enough, the skin slows over the years because it loses its circulation (food supply) and therefore has to slow down turnover and manufacturing to maintain itself.



Good skin is in. Image: Stocksy

For this reason, Dr Johnson says you should be feeding the skin to increase turnover, rather than compromising its health, and developed Osmosis with the goal of changing the direction of skincare away from excessive exfoliation and towards renewing the dermal layers instead.

“Barrier repair and sun avoidance are the two best options. Focus on ingredients to replace lost lipids and help penetrate critical repair activating nutrients.”

So should we stop exfoliating altogether? Well, yes and no.

“The occasional light exfoliation is not the end of the world, it's just not helpful to long term age reversing strategies.”

Still, if you are going to do so, always start with small amounts and slowly building up to make sure your skin tolerates the product – BHA, AHA, or otherwise.