

INSIDER

These are the best, most effective ingredients you should look for in a moisturizer

Choosing the right moisturizer can feel overwhelming when there are so many different options out there. If you find yourself stuck in the skincare aisle, the best way to decide on a moisturizer is to read the ingredients. Here is a guide to what you should look for when choosing a moisturizer.

Why you need a moisturizer

Everyone can benefit from using moisturizer, whether you have dry or oily skin.

For people with [dry skin](#), a good moisturizer can help you get rid of cracks and flakes.

And though people with [oily skin](#) may tend to avoid moisturizers, this can actually backfire. Because if you don't use a moisturizer, your skin will try to overcompensate for missing moisture by producing even more oil.

"Throughout the day, our skin loses moisture," says [Melissa Doft, MD](#), a plastic surgeon who specializes in skincare and a professor at Weil Cornell Medical College. Moisturizer, as its name implies, will help replenish this moisture and keep your skin hydrated.

"Furthermore, as we age, we lose oil-producing glands in the skin," Doft says. This can leave skin dried out and more prone to damage. Moisturizers help reverse this process by locking in water and replenishing your skin's protective barrier.

How to choose the right moisturizer

Most moisturizers contain three types of ingredients, each with a different function. They are:

- **Humectants** draw water into the top layer of your skin, called the epidermis, from the air and from deeper layers of your skin. Common humectants include glycerin, hyaluronic acid, and propylene glycol.
- **Emollients**, such as shea butter, cocoa butter, and octyldodecanol, help fill any cracks in the epidermis and seal in moisture.
- **Occlusives** including petrolatum, cetyl alcohol, and lanolin, form a protective barrier over your skin to stop it from losing moisture.

[Many moisturizers contain all three types of ingredients](#), with the exception of certain facial moisturizers. Many facial moisturizers may have fewer heavy occlusive ingredients that can clog pores, compared with lotions meant for the thick skin on elbows or feet.

Here are some of the best moisturizing ingredients to look for:

Glycerin

Glycerin is the [third most common ingredient](#) in moisturizers, coming in just behind water and fragrance. Glycerin is a humectant, meaning that it keeps your skin hydrated by drawing in water from the air and lower layers of skin. This helps to keep the top layer of your skin from getting dry, as dryness can damage your skin's [barrier against bacteria and irritants](#).

According to [a 2016 review](#) of moisturizer ingredients, glycerin is considered to be the most effective humectant. However, in dry environments, humectants like glycerin won't be able to draw moisture from the air and may take a lot of moisture from the lower layers of your skin, resulting in more dryness. For this reason, it's important to [combine glycerin with an emollient ingredient](#) like shea butter to make sure your skin doesn't dry out.

Hyaluronic acid

Hyaluronic acid is another humectant ingredient found in many moisturizers, but is also [naturally produced by your skin](#) to help retain water. However, as you age, you start to [lose the hyaluronic acid in your skin](#), making skin more likely to dry out. This means that older people may want to look for moisturizers with hyaluronic acid as a main ingredient.

Hyaluronic acid also decreases when your skin is exposed to the [UV radiation in sunlight](#) over long periods of time. So if you spend a lot of time outdoors, applying moisturizers with hyaluronic acid is particularly important.

It is an important ingredient in any moisturizer, as it can help restore your skin's natural ability to hold moisture and appear soft, even as you age.

Shea butter

Shea butter is another natural ingredient that comes from the seeds of shea trees. It's an emollient and works to smooth out your skin and keep moisture contained. By [filling in cracks in your skin](#), emollients like shea butter can help heal a damaged skin barrier and hide imperfections to make your skin look younger.

Shea butter also helps soothe inflammatory symptoms like redness or swelling by [slowing down the production of inflammatory cells](#). However, if you are struggling with acne, you may want to avoid using shea butter on your face, as it can [clog pores](#).

Petrolatum

Petrolatum is an occlusive ingredient that works by creating a protective coating over your skin that [prevents water from evaporating](#). Doft says that petrolatum is the most effective occlusive at sealing in moisture.

Using a moisturizer with both humectants like glycerin and petrolatum can help draw water in and then [seal it into your upper and lower skin layers](#). Alternatively, you can apply a pure petrolatum ointment like Vaseline immediately after [taking a shower](#), to lock in the extra moisture. Petrolatum can also be found in smaller amounts in many moisturizing lotions, which can help to avoid the heavy ointment feeling.

The bottom line

Doft recommends a couple of over-the-counter moisturizers that contain some of the most effective ingredients. "From the drug store, I love Cerave," Doft says, adding that it combines both glycerin and hyaluronic acid, as well as petrolatum. "I also like Neutrogena hydroboost which is packed with hyaluronic acid," Doft says.

Picking out the best moisturizer for your skin may require some trial and error, but looking for moisturizers with highly effective humectant, emollient, and occlusive ingredients can help guide you.