

The Backup Routine for Bad Skin Days

By Rita Lee, JustAboutSkin.com blog



When you're having a bad skin day, do you have a backup routine to turn to? It's helpful to have a set of products that you can rely on to get you through those days.

The topic of this post is **preparing a backup routine**. The inspiration for it came from my own experience recently (my skin felt raw), and a number of emails from people asking for help with stressed skin. In all cases, the skin was stressed by products or stress in their personal life. They needed a temporary routine to get them through that hump.

WHEN DO YOU NEED A BACKUP ROUTINE?

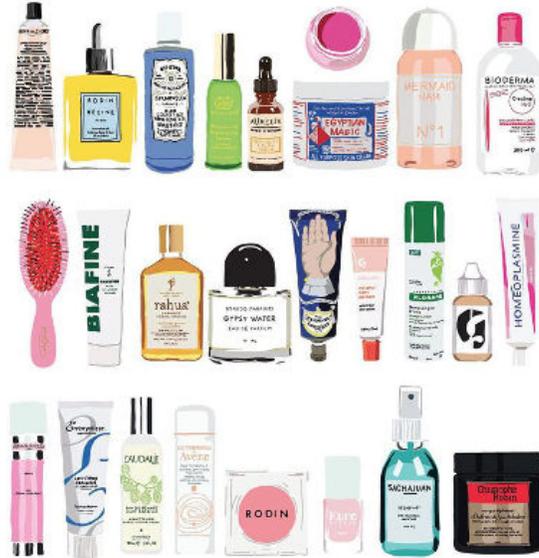
Before I go into what's helpful in a backup routine, let's go over cases where you might need one.

When do you need a backup routine?

- When your skin is in pain or feels uncomfortable
- When your skin is red, flaky, or itchy (and this is not normal for you)
- When your skin has reacted badly and immediately to a product
- When your skin has been irritated by exposure outdoors (sun, wind, dry air)
- When a bug or something else has bitten you
- When you've been scratched or hit by an object
- When you're sick with a cold or flu

PREPARE NOW FOR LATER

If you don't have a set of backup products, now's a good time to think about it. You want to look for products **when you're NOT having a bad skin day**. The last thing you want to do is experiment with products when your skin is distressed.



The first thing you should do is inventory your current set of products and identify which ones are 'SAFE.'

By safe, I'm NOT referring to toxicity of ingredients, a topic which constantly galls me because nearly all ingredients you will find in skincare are safe, but some are nevertheless tagged unjustly as unsafe by misinformed people.

By safe, I mean you can use it on your face **without any risk of your skin reacting to it**. In other words, it's **reliable at all times**, especially in times of need.

How do you know which ones are reliable? Simply by experience.

These are products you have used before that have not bothered you on bad days. They also feel good when your skin is healthy. You will find yourself unconsciously gravitating toward them because we tend to follow what's "tried and true."

GO MINIMAL



When my skin is feeling irritated, I go into **MINIMAL MODE**. This means my routine gets stripped down to the absolute bare bones.

My idea of bare bones is **Cleanse and Moisturize**. That's it. Number one, get the skin clean. Number two, put something on it to nourish it.

Let me elaborate more on both next.

BACKUP CLEANSING

While you may be tempted to skip cleansing in the morning or altogether if your skin is not well, you still need to cleanse morning and night – just differently.

The **evening cleanse** is more important, so let's start with that first. In the evening, I use only one cleanser – **either a cleansing oil or milky cleanser**.

Cleansing Oil vs Cleansing Balm

Now here's a key distinction that is subtle but will prove helpful – I choose a cleansing oil as opposed to a cleansing balm (something solid or creamy that melts into a liquid). An oil in liquid form is better than an oil in solid form because it requires less rubbing.



Most cleansing balms require you to work the balm into skin – you have to rub it with some pressure over skin for it to melt into an oil.

Compare this with a liquid oil, which only needs gentle maneuvering to glide over skin. A liquid simply travels more readily over skin, assuming it's not a high-friction, viscous oil.

Occasionally, you will come across some liquid cleansing oils that are very hard to move – they are terrible formulations. Avoid them by always trying a sample before you buy. Even testing it on your hand will tell you right away how easy it is to move across skin.

So why no rubbing? When your skin is irritated, you don't want to touch or move it around. Rubbing generates friction and heat, which can inflame skin that is in all likelihood already inflamed (even if it's not visible). If you're breaking out, rubbing can of course disturb pores and spread pus.

Be very gentle with your movements when you're cleansing. Light pressure, light stroking.

Cleansing Oil vs Milky Cleanser



Whether I use a cleansing oil or milky cleanser depends on three factors:

1. Am I wearing makeup?
2. Am I wearing a thick layer of mineral sunscreen?
3. How dry or chafed does my skin feel?

If I am wearing makeup, the cleansing oil is the definitive choice, because it does a MUCH better job of thoroughly removing makeup.

If my skin has a thick layer of mineral sunscreen that has remained on my face (not rubbed off during the day), then the cleansing oil wins too.



Oils are very nourishing, which means they **feed the skin with essential fatty acids**. Oils are made of fatty acids. Your skin is partially made of fatty acids. Oils give your skin more of what it needs.

Many cleansing oils leave a tiny little bit of oil behind. You can't see this oil, but the evidence of it is softer feeling skin.

When choosing a cleansing oil for aggravated skin, try to find one that doesn't leave your skin squeaky. (You can feel or hear the squeak.) There's quite a range of outcomes in terms of how much "residue" is left behind. A few cleansing oils are a bit stripping, while others will leave you wanting for another rinse.

So, when do I reach for the milky cleanser?

- If I am not wearing makeup and I am in the mood for it (preferring a milky texture over an oil that day).
- If I am short on time. The milky cleanser can do its job very quickly. Spread, stroke a few times, rinse.
- In the morning.



For a morning cleanse, you only need a small amount of cleanser. Just enough for you to feel it, but not enough for you to see it, i.e., no visible foam or suds.

Why even bother with the AM cleanse if you're using so little cleanser? Because skin secretes sweat and oil overnight. If clogged pores or breakouts is an ongoing issue for you, this morning cleanse will be important. If you're paper dry all the time and suffer no congestion, or it's the middle of winter (cold and dry), you can skip the morning cleanse.

BACKUP MOISTURIZING

The second thing you need is a moisturizer that will alleviate any discomfort you have and nourish the skin. Your choice of moisturizer will depend on what's happening to your skin.

When skin is under siege, it's because one or more of these things is happening:

1). Something which does not belong is getting through or into skin – THE INTRUDER

- An intruder could be a skincare or cosmetic ingredient, household chemical, pollutant particle, sand/soot, bug (bacteria, fungus, virus), UV radiation, wind.

2). Something which you need is getting out of skin – THE ESCAPEE

- An escapee could be water, lipids (fatty acids), and natural moisturizing factors (molecules naturally present in skin that keep it hydrated and plump).

3) An inflammatory process has been triggered and is escalating – THE WOUND

- The inflammation process typically occurs in response to an intruder, physical wound (e.g., a scrape, cut, or large opening caused by an accident), or brute mechanical force (e.g., a severe blow or fall).

DEALING WITH THE INTRUDER OR ESCAPEE

In either of these cases, your skin barrier has been compromised. It's leaky. Things are getting in and out. To stop the flow of things going in and out, you need to do this:

1. Patch up and strengthen the skin barrier (the technical term for this is Barrier Function). This will slow down the flows going both ways.



First, you can strengthen the barrier by **feeding it with what it needs and craves – fatty acids (lipids)**.

The best source of fatty acids is **oils**. All oils are nourishing and highly reparative.

The key is to find an oil that doesn't make your skin react or break out. This is a challenge for those of you with sensitive or acneic skin, whether skin is under duress or not. So, start searching now. Those of you with normal or dry skin will have many more options.

Second, you can **artificially create a temporary film over skin** with occlusive ingredients. Occlusive means a temporary film that blocks or slows down the passage of ingredients. A temporary film slows down water loss, for example.

Moisturizers are occlusive to some extent. Some more than others. They create a temporary layer. This is the reason you must moisturize daily. The temporary layer created by a moisturizer doesn't last more than a day.

To find a highly occlusive moisturizer, look for a product with "**barrier repair**" somewhere in its product name or description. Professional skincare offers more barrier repair products. They're typically marketed as post-procedure treatments.

Another good option is a silicone-based moisturizer without any water. These are great at protecting the skin barrier while still allowing your skin to 'breathe.

(A short digression – If you're freaking out about silicones, please don't. There's absolutely nothing wrong with them. They're not unsafe or toxic as you may have heard from certain watchdog groups, bloggers, or skincare companies. It's all nonsense. I don't have time to write a blog post about it now, but silicones are perfectly fine. They're also in many skincare products that you probably use and love.)

2. Replenish what you have lost.



The number one thing lost from skin. **Water**. Easiest way to replenish it? Drink more water.

Second easiest way? Use a hydrating toner, serum, or moisturizer with hyaluronic acid, glycerin, or other water-binding ingredients known as humectants. These hold onto water, so water stays inside skin longer.

But here's something to consider – a toner or serum loaded with performance ingredients may be too active for vulnerable skin. A moisturizer, on the other hand, will be less problematic, as it is designed to be partially occlusive (provide a protective coat on skin).

When my skin feels uncomfortable or has reacted to something, it doesn't want too much skincare. The more aggravated it is, especially if my barrier is "leaky," the less it can handle from a product.

I try not to introduce any more than what is necessary. It can handle fatty acids from an oil or simple moisturizer (because fatty acids are always reparative), but it may not handle all the ingredients of a serum, even if it offers hydration.

So, do you skip your usual toner or serum? This is a case-by-case decision. But here's a rule of thumb: The more uncomfortable you feel, especially if you feel stinging or pain, the less you should use. Fewer steps lead to fewer problems.



The other major thing skin loses is lipids, which are the building blocks of skin. **Lipids** are depleted through regular cleansing, exfoliation, and exposure to sun and inclement weather. Even if your barrier is undamaged, you still need to feed skin with a steady supply of lipids.

Lipids are mostly available in moisturizers and oils. Oils are the richer source. You can learn more about face oils [here](#).

If you don't have an oil, or you can't find an oil that doesn't cause a reaction, then use a simple moisturizer that works for you.

Choose a basic moisturizer, one without too many ingredients (more on this below).

If you have very dry skin, then look for a **balm** – a thicker, generally denser type of moisturizer. Dense does not always translate to heavy and greasy. Dense just means there's more "fat" and less water. This gives skin a higher concentration of lipids. Well-formulated balms are concentrated but do not clog pores.

REDUCING INFLAMMATION

If you have an **anti-inflammatory or soothing serum** that works well for you, that's great, you can use it. If it bothers you when your skin is distressed, don't use it – even if it's described as healing or soothing.

There are times when my soothing/healing serums and moisturizers sting when my skin is distressed. This is a sign that my barrier is very compromised (i.e., leaky – ingredients are traveling far too fast into skin). At this point, the best thing to do is seal it up with an oil or moisturizer.

It's like plugging up a leak in a pipe or hose. **Damage Control** time! Seal up the hole immediately to avoid flooding.

Tips For Dealing with Inflamed Skin

You should also follow these **commonsense precautions** if your skin is inflamed:

- 1. Avoid heat.** Don't go near a furnace, sauna, or steam room. Don't exercise too hard (to the point of getting very hot and sweaty). Keep yourself cool.
- 2. Avoid hot water.** Use cool or lukewarm water when cleansing or bathing.
- 3. Stay out of the sun.** Although being in the sunshine feels good, even therapeutic, it's harmful to skin that's compromised. Sun dries out skin and puts an additional burden on your skin's barrier function. It depletes lipids and creates a cascade of free radicals that bombard all the lipids and essential molecules in your skin. The underlying inflammation ends up even greater than before. Instead of helping yourself, you've just delayed the healing process.
- 4. Stay indoors when it's windy outside.** Like the sun, the wind is very drying.
- 5. Don't touch or rub your face.** And definitely no picking! Nothing should disturb the surface. Leave your skin alone and allow it to heal uninterrupted.

NO EXFOLIATION OR EXFOLIATING INGREDIENTS

Exfoliating ingredients aggress skin. The last thing you want to do when your skin is not in good health is strip it. Removing dead skin cells is great on a healthy day. But not when there's turmoil underneath.

As I explained earlier, distressed skin almost always means the barrier is weak. We call it "impaired" in esthetics. Your goal is to build it back up, not tear it down. Chemical exfoliating ingredients unglue the bridges holding dead skin cells. While this helps skin look fresher and more renewed, it also makes skin thinner.

Not the right time for this. Forget about clear pores. Don't worry about clogged up skin. This is secondary. You can always unclog later. **Your number one goal should be to repair your skin barrier.**

The foundation to healthy skin is a strong skin barrier. Without one, you can't and won't have healthy skin. So, the first priority is to get this foundation in order.

Unfortunately, many skincare products today contain an exfoliating ingredient (or more). Many cleansers, toners, serums, and moisturizers, and masks have them. Even oils now too. So this is another case for stripping your routine to the bare minimum.

SKIP THE ACTIVE SERUMS

If you're like me and use anti-aging treatments packed with highly active, performance ingredients, then you need to dial it down on bad skin days. As in take them out altogether. I discontinue all my treatment products, even mild Vitamin C serums.

At most, I use a hydrating toner or calming serum. Ascorbic acid, retinol, or retinoids, AHA's, peptides, and growth factors are all out.



KEEP IT SHORT & SIMPLE (KISS)

KISS! This is one of my favorite skincare rules. Anytime you have a problem, or you can't figure out why you're having that problem, **reduce complexity**.

By simplifying your routine, you increase the probability of healing skin faster. You'll do less harm than you would with more products – no matter how great each product is individually. Combining multiple products always introduces more complexity in terms of how they function together in your skin. It also adds a heavier 'load' on skin.

So, remember to **KISS!** Also, don't experiment during this time. Fall back on the products your skin has already experienced in the past. In other words, no surprises. Skin doesn't like bad surprises!

Healing always takes time. But the quickest path to healing is to allow it to do its job. Skin, by design, has built-in mechanisms to heal itself. You just need to keep that barrier intact, keep the surface clean without stripping it, and leave it alone.

***[Just About Skin](#) is an education based, informative skincare website operated by Rita Lee, a biochemist by training and a licensed esthetician. Her blog is an amazing science-based skincare resource. She has informative guides for learning about the basic science behind blemish prone and problem skin, sensitive skin, pigmentation, anti-aging, and sun-protection. Her articles provide a strong foundational understanding of each topic. ***