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Your biggest skin hero

What does it take to look truly radiant? The latest studies point to one ingredient in particular.

By JOLENE EDGAR

→ THE BRIGHTEST STAR IN THE

skin-care cosmos—the one sparking excitement in beauty aisles and doctor's offices—is unlike any it ingredient we've seen before. For starters, it's not new. It was probably in the first lotion you ever applied. It wasn't dreamed up by a Nobel Prize-winning white coat. It can't even qualify as rare, since it's abundant throughout the body in skin cells, joints, and connective

tissue. Yet hyaluronic acid—a sugar that can hold 1,000 times its weight in water and is able to heal wounds, fight free radicals, and hydrate skin so that it looks smoother—is suddenly elevating creams to cult status. What gives? Having recently undergone a molecular makeover, hyaluronic acid is more effective than ever. Here, experts explain its function and how best to swell your supply.

Unmatched moisturizer

"Hyaluronic acid is sometimes referred to as a goo molecule," says Lara Devgan, M.D., an attending plastic surgeon at Manhattan Eye, Ear & Throat Infirmary. It's an undignified nickname for the humectant that's responsible for imbuing skin with bounce, dewiness, and radiance. The sticky stuff is made by our fibroblasts—the same cells that crank out collagen and elastin. Together, hyaluronic acid, collagen, and elastin minimize wrinkles, folds, and sagging," says Michelle Yagoda, M.D., a clinical instructor of plastic surgery at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City. Throughout life, however, they're subjected to free radicals unleashed by the sun and pollutants. And by our late 20s, as our cellular machine downshifts, we start producing less of all three →

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You can easily replenish your natural reserves and fortify what you've got. "It's all about a basic skin-care regimen, since robust hyaluronic acid production is a reflection of healthy skin," says Joshua Zeichner, M.D., the director of cosmetic and clinical research in dermatology at Mount Sinai Hospital in NYC. That means using sunscreen and antioxidants.

Another thing you can apply: a retinoid. A prescription vitamin A cream "not only reverses sun damage, clears pores, and speeds collagen growth but also stimulates hyaluronic acid synthesis," says David E. Bank, M.D., the director of the Center for Dermatology, Cosmetic and Laser Surgery in Mount Kisco, New York.

And here's a sweet surprise:

"Many studies have shown that heavy exercise increases hyaluronic acid production," Dr. Yagoda says. Serums can also help, albeit temporarily. Unlike hyaluronic acids of old, today's potent versions contain molecules of various sizes and weights that penetrate skin better and stick around longer. "They can significantly improve the way skin looks by hydrating it," says Amy Forman Taub, M.D., an assistant clinical professor at Northwestern University's medical school in Chicago. Plus, "they're great to pair with antiaging retinoids and exfoliants since

they curb the drying side effects." Try Neutrogena Hydro Boost Hydrating Serum (\$20, drug-stores) or PCA Skin Hyaluronic Acid Boosting Serum (\$115, pcaskin.com).

...and at the dermatologist's office

Nearly 2.5 million Americans got hyaluronic acid injections (such as Juvéderm or Restylane) in 2016, so you may already know their magic. Here's the appeal: Gels (\$600 to \$3,000 per syringe) do everything from restoring the light-catching curve of a cheek to perking up a deflated lip line; erase shadowy under-eye hollows to plump fine lines. In the pipeline are thinner gels to "boost radiance in a way we've never been able to do," Dr. Bank says. (We may see the approval of one, Volite, in 2018.)

Beyond substituting what has been lost with age, these shots "trigger the formation of new collagen and hyaluronic acid in the skin," Dr. Bank says. The needle poke also causes a tiny amount of trauma, kicking the skin into repair mode and further activating those cells. Similarly, "lasers, microneedling, and chemical peels can also stimulate hyaluronic acid and collagen production," Dr. Devgan says. Some doctors will spread an injectable hyaluronic acid gel over the top of freshly needled or lasered skin to get you glowing even faster. ★

Should you bother with beauty supplements?

Hyaluronic acid is often in supplements said to improve skin, hair, and nails, as is collagen. Few are backed by clinical studies, so doctors question their efficacy. There is some compelling science: "Oral collagen peptides are proven to increase hyaluronic acid synthesis," Dr. Yagoda says. "In human clinical trials, ingested hyaluronic acid increased water in the skin temporarily," says Dara Liotta, M.D., a facial plastic surgeon in NYC. Look for a powder or liquid formula with 120 mg of hyaluronic acid and 2.5 g of collagen, like Vital Proteins Collagen Beauty Water (\$49, vitalproteins.com).