

cortisone cream, in addition to daily use of a heavier, creamier moisturizer, may take care of stubborn, scaly areas. Some of the latter combine green tea or caffeine to help constrict blood vessels.

Scars

A scar is an unpleasant reminder of an unpleasant experience. After an injury, collagen production revs up to replace damaged cells, but the new tissue often doesn't match the color or texture of the surrounding skin. Prevention is possible; keeping a wound moist with Vaseline or Aquaphor and covering it with a silicone bandage for a week or two will help healing—and possibly ward off a scar altogether. “We don't know exactly why, but silicone bandages make scars flatter and less red,” Fein says.

Once a scar has set in, for the brown raised variety—common in skin that's olive or darker—a dermatologist can advise the best treatment. Pinkish marks, which tend to appear in women with fair to medium skin, may lighten with a nightly retinoid or twice-weekly applications of an AHA cream or beta-hydroxy acid. They all make scars less obvious by “causing the outer layer of skin to peel off and triggering cell turnover,” Fein says. But women with sensitive skin would be wise to choose lactic acid—the gentlest of the bunch—since the others may leave an area red or rashy.

Melasma

Melasma, a hormonally charged form of mottling, is also the most tenacious. It tends to appear on the cheeks, forehead, and upper lip and is “a three-stepper,” Hirsch says, resulting from a genetic predisposition, fluctuating progesterone

and estrogen levels (usually caused by pregnancy or birth control pills), and exposure to sunlight. Because it's so stubborn, dermatologists recommend heading straight for the strongest treatment: hydroquinone. After spot-testing the product, women of all skin colors should use it the same way: at night (in case there is redness or irritation), on clean skin, and only on the darkened areas. “People sometimes get really overenthusiastic and start smearing it all over, and you can do just as much damage in the other direction,” Hirsch says, by overbleaching or causing uneven, multitone patches of skin.

For women whose skin becomes too irritated to use hydroquinone for the long duration sometimes required to treat melasma, or who experience darkening (a rare side effect that may occur, particularly after months of use), there are other products that can be spread all over the face more comfortably. To increase the effectiveness, choose one that combines ingredients that operate in different ways, suggests Audrey Kunin, associate clinical instructor of dermatology at the University of Kansas School of Medicine. For instance, Donnell Lightening Gel combines tyrosinase-blocking kojic acid to slow pigment formation, vitamin C to interrupt the final stages of melanin production, and glycolic and lactic acids to boost the turnover of new cells.

No matter the treatment, melasma may take months to improve, but Alexiades-Armenakas says that gentle weekly professional peels containing glycolic acid, arginine, or arbutin may speed the results. ♦

Light Saver

When in doubt, blame any skin problem on the sun. “The production of tyrosinase—the pigment-creating enzyme—is a direct result of being in the sun,” Ranella Hirsch says. “People will get a temporary improvement from a [skin-brightening] treatment, only to get instantly worse when they step outside without sunscreen.” But blindly slathering on SPF 60 won't cut it. SPF ratings correspond only to protection from UVB, the sunburning rays, not the deeply penetrating UVA light, which causes pigment problems. Inspect the ingredients to make sure a sunscreen contains a potent UVA filter, such as Mexoryl, or a stabilized form of avobenzone, such as Helioplex, and wear it every day, year-round. “My melasma patients say they use SPF 30 every day and can't understand why they're not getting anywhere,” Lewis says. “But as soon as I put them on a really good UVA blocker, like Mexoryl—boom, they start responding.”

Brighten Up

Retouchers even out models' skin with the click of a mouse. In real life, a skin-brightening product can help deliver almost similar results. David Horne, assistant clinical professor of dermatology at New York Presbyterian-Cornell University, evaluates these six. —JENNIFER LAING



MD Skincare by Dr. Dennis Gross Hydra-Pure Radiance Renewal Serum: The light serum contains retinol, a form of vitamin A that “may reverse some sun damage,” Horne says. It also includes well-known antioxidant vitamins A, C, and E.

Ambi Fade Cream: Horne's top pick because “it's got hydroquinone, a known lightener; alpha hydroxy acid to increase penetration; and sunscreen to help you maintain the improvement in your skin,” he says.



Good Skin Smooth-365: It's light enough to layer under makeup and has “botanicals that aren't proven to brighten dark spots, but grape-seed extract may reverse sun damage,” Horne says. “Its mica and titanium dioxide make skin reflective.”

Clarins Bright Plus HP On-the-Spot Corrector: This product doesn't contain the typical proven skin-lightening ingredients like hydroquinone, but it does have salicylic acid, which, Horne says, “may deliver a mild exfoliating effect.”



Dr. Susan Taylor's Rx for Brown Skin Bright & Even Exfoliating Moisturizer: It contains soy, an ingredient that's been shown to diminish dark spots. “It's also formulated without fragrance, lanolin, or alcohol,” so it's good for sensitive skin.

Shiseido White Lucent Intensive Brightening Mask: This disposable cloth face mask is ideal for dry, dull skin. “The glycerin base really moisturizes, and that makes dry skin look more luminous,” Horne says.

