The Retinol Revolution
Discover the pros and cons of retinol and other retinoids.

WITH AGING AN EVER PRESENT CONCERN, one ingredient has stood the test of time and is making a comeback. Call it a retinol resurgence, if you will. This derivative of vitamin A has much to offer the spa industry. “It exfoliates the skin and improves its look and feel,” says Melissa Votion, spa director at Spa Black (San Antonio, TX). “It reduces signs of sun damage, targets hyperpigmentation, and boosts collagen.”

Dermatologist Craig Kraffert, M.D., founder of DermStore.com, has also jumped on the retinol bandwagon. He’s now launching a retinol-based skincare line, called Amarte. “Recent clinical studies confirm topical retinol’s measurable benefits for skin compromised by sun exposure or aging,” he says. “Retinol thickens the skin’s outer layer, resulting in less wrinkling and a smoother look.”

Yet despite the proven and visible benefits, retinol isn’t part of the product mix at most spas. And that begs the question: Could you be making better use of retinol in your spa? “Certainly retinol belongs in spa treatments,” says board-certified dermatologist Howard Murad, M.D., whose well-known Murad products include several retinol formulations. “It’s a perfect fit.” Rhonda Allison, founder and CEO of her namesake skincare line, which includes several products containing retinol, agrees. “Why wouldn’t spas want to utilize a tool that offers noticeable results for their clients?” she asks. “When used properly, this time-tested ingredient will prove a necessary component in any esthetic professional’s skincare toolbox.”

Understanding Topical Technology
Retinol belongs to the “retinoid” family, similar to its more powerful, prescription-only cousin: tretinoin (the brand name is Retin-A). Other topical retinoids include retinyl palmitate and retinaldehyde, both of which are gentler and milder than retinol, which in turn, is gentler and milder than tretinoin.

When applied to the skin, “retinol is converted to retinoic acid, which stimulates collagen production and plumps the epidermis for smoother, firmer skin tone,” explains Celeste Hilling, CEO of Skin Authority. “Retin-A is already in the form of retinoic acid.” That’s why it works faster than non-prescription retinoids and may be more effective at a lower concentration.

According to Kristina Kannada, national education coordinator for HydroPeptide, spa-goers are often concerned about the percentage of retinol in the anti-aging serums and moisturizers used on their skin. “Although the percentage can make a difference, especially if the percentage is too low, what is most important is the delivery system, package stability, and other ingredients the retinol is paired with,” says Kannada. “Using a product with a range of anti-aging ingredients plus retinol is far more valuable for skin than using a product with only a supposedly high percentage of retinol.”

But before rushing in to add retinol treatments to your menu, you should be aware of the

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downsides, says licensed esthetician Susanne Schmaling, director of education for Associated Skin Care Professionals and author of Milady’s Aesthetician Series: Aging Skin (Delmar Cengage Learning, 2011). “Redness, peeling, flakiness, and irritation are common,” she says. “Retinol is not suited for clients who just want a relaxing facial.”

Taking Precautions
Customizing retinol treatments by skin type can lessen the chance of side effects, says Janna Bowman, licensed esthetician at Parlor 308 Salon and Spa (Los Gatos, CA). “For a client with sensitive skin, I might select a mask or peel with retinaldehyde, to which I’ll add anti-inflammatory, soothing, or hydrating ingredients such as vitamin C, beta glucan, willow herb, and hyaluronic acid.” Bowman notes that retinol can cause sensitivity. Sustained-release formulations are less likely to cause irritation, plus they convey longer acting results, says Murad, whose line includes a time-released retinol concentrate that targets deep wrinkles.

Another precaution: “Retinol can make skin more sensitive to developing a sunburn,” says Joshua Zeichner, M.D., director of cosmetic and clinical research in the dermatology department at Mount Sinai Medical Center (New York City). That photosensitivity, combined with intensive cell turnover, is why Stacie Smith, spa director at the Sanctuary Spa at the Bay Club Marin (Corte Madera, CA), advises clients to use sunscreen after treatments. “Every person’s skin is different and can have a varied level of tolerance for retinol,” she says.

Forging a Retinol Relationship
Clients do need to be aware that a single retinol treatment may not do much for them. Retinol’s real benefits accrue over time. Murad compares skincare to dental care. Sure, you see a dentist a couple times a year for a good cleaning, but you still need to brush and floss at home. He says, “It’s the same with retinol—you will look better and have immediate benefits after just one concentrated retinol spa treatment, but the more you do at home, the better the results.”—Maryann Hammers

Retinol Revival
Help your clients turn back the hands of time with these retinol-based anti-agers.

Academie Scientific Beauty Firmness Treatment Retinol Ampoule: Maintaining the firmness of tissues by stimulating the synthesis of supporting fibers, this solution helps the skin to recover elasticity. www.myrdm.com

Amber Products Ayur-Medic Retinol Cream: For mature skin, this cream encourages exfoliation and diminishes pore size, fine lines, and hyperpigmentation. www.amberproducts.com

Germaine de Capuccini Retinage Filler: Featuring pure retinol, this filler works on the visible signs of aging by maximizing cellular renewal. North and Central: www.acispaa.com; West and South: www.germainesouth.com

GlyMed Plus Retinol Restart Rejuvenation Serum: The perfect treatment product for aging skin on the face and neck, this serum stimulates collagen production. www.glymedplus.com

HydroPeptide Anti-Wrinkle Polish and Plump Peel: Polishing crystals diminish the appearance of fine lines and wrinkles while lactic acid and vitamin C take away dullness and discoloration. www.hydropeptide.com

Image Skincare Ageless Total Retinol A Crème: A blend of retinol, glycolic acid, and lactic acid exfoliates and strengthens collagen. www.imagesskincare.com

Osmosis Pür Medical Skincare Correct Skin Serum: This all-natural chirally correct anti-aging serum relies on seven collagen and elastin stimulators, including a patented liposomal retinaldehyde. www.osmosisskincare.com

Prana SpaCeuticals Reverse A: This moisturizing antioxidant provides healing, restores elasticity, and reduces dark circles and puffiness. www.pranaspaceuticals.com

Rhonda Allison Retinol Supreme: Working deep in the skin, this rejuvenating formula regenerates, improves texture, diminishes fine lines, strengthens capillaries, and creates healthy, glowing skin. www.rhondaallison.com

SkinCeuticals Retinol 0.5 and 1.0: Used for advanced treatment of pre-conditioned skin, these products help stimulate cell regeneration and build collagen. www.skinceuticals.com

Sanitas Retinol Peeling Cream: A professional-strength treatment, this cream helps diminish dark spots, blemishes, and fine lines and wrinkles. www.sanitas-skincare.com

SESHA Skin Therapy Complex-A Renewal Emulsion: This highly concentrated vitamin A emulsion targets lines, dull or blotchy texture, and pigmentation while increasing the rate of cell turnover. www.seshaskin.com—Jennifer James