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Experts Say This Acid Is Like a Magic Eraser for Blackheads

by KAITLYN MCLINTOCK

Oh, blackheads. Let us count the ways we hate you. You pester our skin with tiny black pinprick blemishes that are equal parts stubborn and exasperating. It seems like no matter how diligent we think we're being with our skincare routine, there are always a few rogue blackheads that refuse to leave our pores, littering the skin across our nose, chin, or forehead. They just sit there, taunting us. "Will you stop at nothing?" we yell while shaking our fists to the sky and waiting for our pore-extracting face mask to work its magic.

As far as anti-blackhead skincare goes, we've tried our fair share. Some products have worked wonders (like select [retinol serums](#) and an under-the-radar [Nordic Silt Mask](#)), while others have left much to be desired. One of our all-time favorite blackhead-removing product categories, though, has to be our varied collection of glycolic acid exfoliators. According to experts, our love of glycolic acid is founded on reason because the powerful skincare ingredient is basically the closest thing there is to a blackhead magic eraser.



According to Heather Wilson, licensed esthetician and director of brand development at [InstaNatural](#), "**Glycolic acid is an incredibly effective ingredient for reducing and clearing blackheads because it is an alpha hydroxy acid with a smaller molecule, which means it can penetrate deeper into the pores to dissolve excess dirt, sebum, and pore-clogging skin cells.** While that action alone helps to dissolve the oil and dirt that causes blackheads, it also supports cell turnover, which means your skin is creating new, healthier skin cells at a more rapid pace, which results in clearer skin."

Glycolic acid, in regard to blackhead removal, brings about mixed reactions. Some people are overjoyed to have a new effective blackhead-busting skincare ingredient to try, while others remain skeptical. This might be due to the fact that they've tried other acids in the past, such as lactic acid, to no avail. "Lactic acid is also an alpha hydroxy acid, but since its molecule is larger, it doesn't penetrate quite as deeply as glycolic acid," Wilson explains. "Because of that, Glycolic Acid is more powerful and effective at ridding blackheads on the skin. Lactic acid will help with blackheads as well, but it tends to work more on the surface of the skin versus deeper into the pores." In fact, glycolic acid has the smallest molecule size out of all AHAs—not just lactic acid. That's according to Edyta Jarosz, lead esthetician at [PFrankMD Skin Salon](#) and global brand ambassador for [MDNA Skin](#). "It has the smallest molecules in the group so it is able to penetrate skin deeply and easily, making it the most effective for treating fine lines, acne, blackheads, oiliness, etc. Chemical peels use a high percentage of this acid, and it can be very effective if done safely and properly."



As far as specific glycolic acid products go, Wilson recommends this InstaNatural serum, which is combined with vitamin C and hyaluronic acid to provide antioxidants and hydration. "Glycolic acid is a powerful ingredient and should be introduced into skin care routines slowly," she says. "For those new to glycolic acid, start with a gentle product, such as the InstaNatural [Glycolic Acid Serum](#) (\$24) or [Glycolic Acid Cream](#) (\$22), every other day for one to two weeks." Only then, after ensuring your skin tolerates the ingredient, should you increase the frequency of use. Or you may consider trying a peel. **"A weekly (or biweekly) glycolic peel is a great product to use because it will provide a visible improvement in the tone and texture of your skin,"** Wilson explains. "Additionally, using a glycolic acid serum or cream in your regular nighttime routine is a great way to maintain the results of your weekly peel. I personally love the InstaNatural [Glycolic Peel](#) (\$25), because it only requires 30 to 60 seconds of my time and is gentle enough to be used alongside the InstaNatural Glycolic Acid Serum."



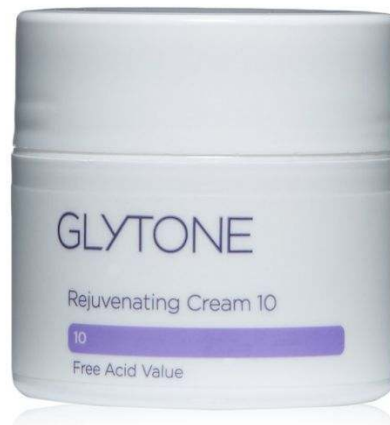
We like to use these peel pads from Cane + Austin, which have 30% glycolic acid (plus a bevy of other safe-for-skin acids) to slough away dead skin, oil, and pore-clogging debris. We use them a couple times a week after we wash our face and before we add moisturizer. They feel tingly and refreshing. Plus, they're so effective at exfoliating, we can see a visible difference in the way our makeup applies the next day. It looks smoother and more refined.



These First Aid Beauty exfoliating pads work similarly to the Cane + Austin ones. We use them after we cleanse our faces and before we apply moisturizers and serums. A combination of glycolic and lactic acids exfoliate, dissolve blackheads, and smooth the surface of the skin, while cucumber tones and lemon peel and licorice impart radiance. We've been using them for years; this product is kind of a classic in our skincare collections.



If pre-soaked exfoliating pads aren't your thing, try a peel like this vegan one from Earth Science. It uses glycolic acid along with papaya fruit enzymes to break apart pore-clogging (and blackhead-causing) impurities on the surface of the skin. Simply apply it to your skin after cleansing, wait 10 to 15 minutes until it dries, and then wash it off. It will unveil clear skin, even tone, reduce dark spots, and even do a number on signs of aging.



For people with sensitive skin, traditional exfoliating pads can sometimes prove too irritating, which is why many people opt for a glycolic acid moisturizer instead. They still contain enough of the active ingredient to work their exfoliating and refining magic, but it's not as concentrated as other glycolic acid products, such as chemical peels. They moisturize at the same time, which saves a skincare step and ensures we aren't stripping our skin. This one from Glytone, which is a skincare brand that specializes in glycolic acid products, has 10% free acid value, along with sweet almond oil and vitamin E for hydration and softness. (For more similar products, check out our list of [the 10 best glycolic acid moisturizers](#).)

As for Jarosz, she recommends using Dr. Paul Jarrod Frank Clear & Bright Pads, which are sold exclusively in the Skin Salon. They have "a high potency of alpha (glycolic and lactic) and beta (salicylic) hydroxy acids to exfoliate the skin. Clear & Bright Pads may be used daily as an acne therapy, to refine pores, and smooth skin texture," Jarosz says the combination of AHAs and BHAs (such as salicylic acid) are key. Salicylic acid "is lipophilic (attracted to fat/oils) and concentrates at the surface of the pore to dissolve the plugs," she explains. "Unlike AHAs which are water soluble, beta hydroxy acids are oil soluble, which means they are able to penetrate deeper than your skin surface and deep into your pores." In other words, they go deep to clear debris and clogged pores—deeper than other acids out there. **"This penetrative action makes BHAs great for treating all types of acne, from surface whiteheads or blackheads to deeper cystic acne. Consistent use will prevent the blackheads before they form and help clear existing pores."**

Whatever you do, be sure to wear sunscreen. Take it from Wilson, who says, "Glycolic acid can make your skin more sensitive to the sun so it is recommended to use glycolic acid products only at night, follow with an SPF 30 during the day, and discontinue its use 24 to 48 hours before spending an extended amount of time in the sun." If you use these blackhead-busting acids correctly (and wear sunscreen during the day), then brighter, clearer skin is in your future. Plus, you'll be reaping the benefits of consistent exfoliation, which is a whole other topic...