



Girl on Fire

When an anti-aging prescription wrecked one *Allure* editor's complexion, she set out to rehab her skin—and her self-esteem.

By Danielle Pergament

Flawless skin has never been my problem; strangers don't stop to ask me where I get my facials. At the same time, I've never used concealer, foundation, or tinted moisturizer—I've never felt like I really needed it. My skin has always been...fine. I "laid out" too much in college—and now have the dark spots to show for it. I tend to break out right before my period. And I got my first wrinkles around the time my friends did. See? Normal.

To me, a dermatologist has always been a person who only tells me if my moles are harmless or foreign invaders. Fillers, injections, lasers, chemical peels—all that stuff freaks me out. Despite having worked at *Allure* for over a decade, I don't even use anti-aging creams. But then I turned 40, and at a mole check, my dermatologist uttered six words that would change my face—and ultimately, my life: "Maybe we should try a retinoid."

I've read—and written—about the magical powers of retinoids for years. Softening my forehead lines, smoothing my skin, maybe

plumping up my collagen inventory: That all sounded swell. What 41-year-old wouldn't want to look more like her 35-year-old self? Plus, retinoids seemed harmless. What could possibly go wrong?

I dutifully rubbed the perfect pea-size blob on my skin every night before bed and went to sleep ready to

look a little pink or even peel-y in the morning. And I did. But ten days later, I woke up not exactly pink. The color of my skin could only be described as tomato. After a few days, my nose, jaw, and chin were covered in acne. I even had acne on places people don't get acne—the middle of my cheeks and the top of my neck. I'd been on a prescription retinoid for almost two weeks, and my skin was red, inflamed, bumpy, uncomfortable, and, frankly, hideous. I quit retinol cold turkey.

But my wrecked face stayed with me. Weeks passed, and there was no improvement. Every night, I would lie in bed and listen to the calm, motherly voice in my head telling me that if I drank lots of water and got eight hours of sleep, my skin would go back to its unremarkable state. But every morning, before I even opened my eyes, I could feel the sensitive, inflamed pain that only comes with a new pimple. I thought of reasons to stay home. I canceled dinner plans, and when I was at work, I hid in my office, avoiding any meeting I could.

The lowest point was when my (very loving) husband looked at me and said, "I really hate your dermatologist." Over the next nine months, I saw three other doctors, spent hundreds of dollars on skin-soothing remedies, and tried 17,000 creams from the *Allure* beauty closet. And just when things couldn't get worse, I met a doctor who told me to give up spicy foods, alcohol, exercise, and hot climates. Perfect. All I had to do was move to

Spitsbergen and eat sardines for the rest of my life. I actually cried in his office.

Finally, I went back to the dermatologist who got me into this mess in the first place. She was horrified—not at my appearance, though that would have been understandable—but at the fact that her harmless little anti-aging prescription had destroyed my skin, not to mention my self-esteem. She gave me prescriptions for oral steroids and antibiotics—we were hitting the hard stuff. She explained that this very rare reaction meant that 1) I must have had an underlying condition exacerbated by the retinol and 2) I would have to treat my newfound rosacea for the rest of my life. So retinol was basically a supercute guy I met in a bar who gave me a horrible, incurable STD.

My new (sigh) condition means that while all my similarly aged friends are trying microdermabrasion on their dark spots, laser treatments on their wrinkles, or just gold-jarred anti-aging creams, I will be applying cold compresses. I'm going to have to age naturally whether I like it or not (and I don't). Any change to my skin-care lineup, any change in my birth control pill, and I risk a red face full of acne. I'm not saying I've learned to love my wrinkles or sun spots; I'm just saying I like to venture out in public from time to time.

On the best days, my skin is back to being...fine. I cleanse my face, but that's it. I reach for sunscreen, though not without trepidation. I'll keep doing what I'm doing, which is to say, pretty much nothing. And if the day comes when my skin betrays me, well, I hear Spitsbergen can actually be quite lovely. ♦

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