AHA vs BHA Benefits

CHEAT SHEET

Editor's Note

I created this resource to help you understand the differences between AHAs (alpha-hydroxy acids) and BHAs (beta-hydroxy acids). You might be surprised to know that these acid-based exfoliating agents share many of the same skin benefits! With this cheat sheet, you'll be able to identify AHAs and BHAs in ingredients lists, know what they can do, and make an informed choice about which one(s) to use on your skin.

Michelle

PS: If you're new to acids, start low and go slow to avoid dryness and irritation!

AHA vs BHA Benefits

Overview

AHA	BHA
Exfoliates the skin surface	Exfoliates the skin surface
Fades pigmentation and brightens	Fades pigmentation and brightens
Improves wrinkles	Improves wrinkles
Water-soluble	Oil-soluble
	Deep-cleans pores
	Mildly antibacterial
	Reduces excess oil
Hydrates the skin	Hydrates the skin
Can cause inflammation	Anti-inflammatory
Increases skin thickness	Normalizes cell division
Photosensitizing	Non-photosensitizing

AHA vs BHA Benefits

Background

AHAs and BHAs are acid-based exfoliating ingredients for the skin.

- **AHAs** are alpha-hydroxy acids, derived from natural sources such as sugarcane, milk and fruit.
- **BHAs** are beta-hydroxy acids, derived from willow tree bark, wintergreen leaves and sweet birch bark.

Here's how to identify AHAs and BHAs when reading an ingredients list:

AHA	BHA
Citric acid	Beta hydroxybutanoic acid
Glycolic acid	Betaine salicylate*
Lactic acid	Salicylic acid
Malic acid	Salix nigra bark extract*
Mandelic acid	Sodium salicylate*
Tartaric acid	Trethocanic acid
	Tropic acid
	Willow bark extract*

*Salicylic acid derivatives and closely related ingredients that exert a similar effect.

Benefits

See the following pages for more details on AHA and BHA benefits.

AHA vs BHA Benefits

Exfoliation

- **Both AHAs and BHAs** exfoliate the skin surface, removing dead skin cells and creating a smoother texture.

Pigmentation and Tone

- **Both AHAs and BHAs** can treat pigmentation, sun spots and age spots. They also help brighten dull skin and even out skin tone.
- **BHAs** won't trigger post-inflammatory hyperpigmentation (but AHAs might, on darker skin types).

Wrinkles

- **Both AHAs and BHAs** can help reduce the appearance of fine lines and wrinkles by softening and shedding the top layer of skin cells. At higher concentrations, they can also stimulate collagen and elastin repair, which may reduce deeper wrinkles.

Penetration

- **AHAs** are water-soluble, so they typically remain on the surface of the skin. In higher concentrations, they can penetrate the dermis.
- **BHAs** are oil-soluble, so they can penetrate through sebum and oil-based skincare products to go deep into the pores.

AHA vs BHA Benefits

Pores

- **BHAs** deep-clean pores by exfoliating the pore lining, loosening clogs and allowing sebum to flow out more freely. This helps to treat and prevent clogged pores, acne, blackheads and whiteheads. Pores appear smaller, since they're not stretched out by oil and dead skin cells.

Bacteria

- **BHAs** have an antibacterial action on the skin, by downregulating the factors needed for bacterial replication. However, they have not been shown to kill the *P. acnes* bacteria that lead to acne.

Oily Skin

- **BHAs** break down sebum and reduce excess oil secretion in acne-prone skin.

Hydration

- **Both AHAs and BHAs** are humectants. They hydrate the skin by helping it attract and hold onto water.

AHA vs BHA Benefits

Inflammation and Irritation

- **AHAs** can cause inflammation and irritation (particularly glycolic acid, due to its small molecule size).
- **BHAs** are anti-inflammatory. They can help calm and soothe the skin, and reduce swelling and redness.
- **Both AHAs and BHAs** have the potential to be drying and irritating if used in too high concentrations and/or too frequently.

Skin Thickness

- **Both AHAs and BHAs** can increase skin thickness and the density of collagen and elastin when used at higher concentrations (i.e. 25 to 30 percent).
- **BHAs** at lower concentrations have been shown to decrease skin thickness by normalizing cell division.

Photosensitivity

- **AHAs** make skin more photosensitive (sensitive to the sun).
- **BHAs** do not increase photosensitivity, and even have some photoprotective properties. They can help protect skin from sun and DNA damage, prevent sunburn and remove sun-damaged cells.
- **Both AHAs and BHAs** can increase photosensitivity if over-used.
- Always apply daytime sun protection when using AHAs and BHAs.