



A FREE CHAPTER · THE COMPLETE AGELESS BLUEPRINT

# Chapter Thirteen

## What didn't work, and what it cost

Twenty products, devices and supplements, graded by the evidence, with the price I paid for each. This is the longest chapter in the book and the one I would read first.

This is the complete chapter, exactly as it appears in the book — pages 41 to 48, nothing removed.

CAROLINE · NOT A DOCTOR

## What didn't, and what it cost

Almost everything below is something I bought — and where I did not, I say so. The grades are the honest state of the evidence, and the prices are what I actually paid.

This is the longest chapter in the book and it is the one I would read first.

A note on how to use it. I have not graded these on whether they are pleasant, and several of them are. I have graded them on whether there is credible evidence that they change the structure of skin. Some things are worth buying purely because you enjoy them — you simply want to know which category you are in when you hand over the money.

### WHY SOME OF THESE SAY "KEPT" AND ARE NOT IN PART ONE

A few verdicts below say I still own something, and you will then not find it anywhere in the routine. That is deliberate, and the distinction is worth more than any single product in this chapter.

**Part One is what I do without deciding.** It happens at the same time every day, it survives a bad week, and it is short precisely because every item in it is automatic. Nothing earns a place there unless I would still do it while ill, travelling, or having a terrible month.

**The things marked *kept* below are a different category.** They are what I reach for occasionally — a spare twenty minutes on a Sunday, the evening before something that matters. I am glad to own them. They are not part of the protocol and they never became part of it.

Collapsing those two categories is exactly how people end up with a twelve-step routine. Something pleasant gets promoted

into the daily list, then something else does, and within a year the routine is too large to survive an ordinary Tuesday — at which point it stops happening altogether and you conclude you are bad at this.

Keep the protocol short. Let the occasional things stay occasional. That single boundary is most of the reason mine has lasted twenty-seven years.

#### THE GRADES.

**STRONG** — multiple good human trials, consistent results. **MODERATE** — decent trials, real but smaller effect. **WEAK** — small or inconsistent studies, or an effect that is temporary. **NO GOOD EVIDENCE** — the mechanism does not hold up, or the trials do not exist.

## SERUMS AND ACTIVES

### Niacinamide

**MODERATE**

*Vitamin B3, topical*

The best value item in the entire aisle and almost nobody talks about it, because it is cheap and there is no story in it. Helps the barrier, evens tone, reduces redness. Five per cent is the useful concentration; the ten per cent versions mostly buy irritation.

I PAID \$12–20 · TIMELINE 8–12 weeks · VERDICT Still buy it

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### Hyaluronic acid serum

**WEAK**

*Topical*

It is a humectant. It pulls water to the surface of the skin and holds it there, and skin looks temporarily plumper as a result. That is genuinely all it does. It does not reach the dermis, it does not build anything, and the effect is gone by the following morning.

Pleasant. Wildly oversold. In dry air it can pull moisture *out* of your skin unless you seal it with a moisturiser on top, which is the opposite of what most people are told.

I PAID \$45 · TIMELINE Same day, and gone by tomorrow · VERDICT Buy the \$10 version or skip it

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## Peptide serums

WEAK

*"Signal peptides", "matrix peptides"*

The theory is elegant — short protein fragments that signal the skin to build collagen. The trials are small, frequently manufacturer-funded, and inconsistent. There may be something here eventually. There is not enough yet to justify the prices being charged.

I PAID \$89 · TIMELINE Unclear · VERDICT Stopped buying

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## Growth factor serums

NO GOOD EVIDENCE

*EGF, TGF- $\beta$*

The molecules are far too large to cross the skin barrier in meaningful quantity. This is not a subtle objection — it is a size problem, and no amount of formulation gets around it. A flagship product in this category failed to beat its own vehicle for photodamage at six months.

I PAID \$160 · TIMELINE — · VERDICT The most expensive nothing I have bought

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## Exosome serums

NO GOOD EVIDENCE

*The current expensive one*

Marketed as the successor to retinoids. There is no approved exosome product for any indication, regulators have issued warning letters in this space, and there are no adequately controlled trials in skin. It is being sold on the strength of the word.

I PAID Nothing, and I nearly did · VERDICT Wait five years

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## Plant stem cell creams

NO GOOD EVIDENCE

There are no living cells in the jar — they could not survive the formulation. And plant stem cells cannot signal through human cell receptors, because they are not the same kind of cell. The name is doing all of the work.

I PAID \$70 · VERDICT Embarrassing in retrospect

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## Bakuchiol

WEAK

*Sold as the gentle retinol alternative*

It is not a retinoid — it is a different molecule that produces some similar-looking effects in small studies. Worth trying if retinoids genuinely do not suit you. Not a replacement for one if they do.

One correction worth making: it is widely sold as the pregnancy-safe option. Its safety in pregnancy has never actually been established. The "safe" half of that claim is an assumption, not a finding.

I PAID \$38 · TIMELINE 12 weeks · VERDICT Fine as a second choice

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## Glycolic and lactic acids

MODERATE

*AHAs*

Real, useful, and easy to overdo. Genuinely improves texture and tone. Once or twice a week is plenty, never on the same night as a retinoid, and if your retinoid has become nightly these come out. The single most common error in modern skincare is running both and destroying the barrier.

I PAID \$20–35 · TIMELINE 4–8 weeks · VERDICT Keep, but twice a week maximum

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## DEVICES

### LED and red light masks

MODERATE

The most legitimate device category, and I was surprised by that. There is reasonable trial evidence for red and near-infrared light on fine lines and on inflammation. It is slow, the effect is modest, and it requires genuine consistency — most people use one four times and then keep it in a drawer.

If you will actually use it three or four times a week for six months, it is defensible. If you know yourself well enough to doubt that, put the money into sunscreen you will enjoy wearing.

I PAID \$270 · TIMELINE 8–12 weeks of consistent use · VERDICT Kept, and I use it less than I should

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## Microcurrent devices

WEAK

There is a visible effect and it is temporary — hours, not days. Useful before an evening out if you enjoy the ritual. It is not doing anything structural, and the "gym for your face" framing is marketing rather than physiology.

I PAID \$200 · TIMELINE Immediate, and gone by morning · VERDICT A nice thing, not a treatment

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## Gua sha and jade rollers

WEAK

Measured effects on facial contour are in the range of two to three millimetres and represent fluid moving, not tissue changing. It is de-puffing. It is also genuinely pleasant and it makes people slow down for five minutes, which has its own value.

What it does not do is sculpt bone, drain toxins, or lift anything permanently. Buy it as a nice five minutes, not as a treatment.

I PAID \$28 · TIMELINE Immediate, transient · VERDICT Kept, correctly filed

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## At-home derma rollers

NO GOOD EVIDENCE — AND A SAFETY NOTE

Home rollers have needles too short to reach the depth that produces collagen remodelling in clinical studies, which means you get the risk without the mechanism. They are also difficult to sterilise properly. Infection and scarring are documented outcomes.

This is the one item in this chapter I would tell you not to buy on safety grounds rather than value grounds.

I PAID \$40, used it twice, threw it away · VERDICT Do not

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## THINGS YOU SWALLOW

### Collagen peptides

WEAK

The most popular product in this category and the evidence is far softer than the marketing. There are positive trials; a large share of them are funded by manufacturers, and the independent and better-controlled ones have generally not replicated the effect.

The mechanistic objection is also awkward: you digest it into amino acids like any other protein. If your protein intake is already adequate, you are buying expensive protein.

I PAID \$35/month for about two years · VERDICT Stopped. Put the money into food

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### Biotin for hair and nails

NO GOOD EVIDENCE — AND A REAL WARNING

Biotin does nothing for hair or nails unless you are deficient, and deficiency is rare. That part is merely a waste of money.

The part that matters more: high-dose biotin interferes with laboratory blood tests, including thyroid panels and troponin — the test used to diagnose a heart attack. This has caused misdiagnoses. If you take it, stop several days before any blood test and tell whoever is running it.

I PAID \$18/month · VERDICT Stopped, and I tell people about the blood tests

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### Oral hyaluronic acid

WEAK

A small number of positive studies, mostly small and mostly industry-funded. Plausible in principle, thin in practice.

I PAID \$28/month · VERDICT Stopped

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### NMN

WEAK — FOR ANYTHING YOU CAN SEE

*Nicotinamide mononucleotide, a NAD<sup>+</sup> precursor*

Human trials show it raises NAD<sup>+</sup> in the blood. None has shown a visible skin result, and there is no honest waiting time to give you. The biology is the most interesting thing in this chapter and the evidence for your face is among the thinnest. I take it, and chapter three tells you why that is a personal choice and not a recommendation.

I PAID \$35/month · TIMELINE None you can see · VERDICT Still take it, as a hunch

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## WHOLE CATEGORIES THAT ARE MOSTLY MARKETING

### Eye creams

WEAK

Almost always a moisturiser in a smaller jar at three to five times the price per millilitre. There are a few with real actives in them, and those actives are available more cheaply in a face product. The skin around the eye is thinner and more reactive, which is an argument for using less of something, not for buying a separate something.

I PAID \$60–120, repeatedly, for years · VERDICT Use your moisturiser

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### Neck creams

WEAK

Your neck does need attention — it ages faster than the face and it gives everything away. It does not need its own product. Take whatever is on your fingers downward. I have done exactly that for twenty-seven years.

I PAID \$85 · VERDICT The habit is right, the product is not

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### "Anti-ageing" cleansers

NO GOOD EVIDENCE

A cleanser is on your face for perhaps forty seconds and is then deliberately washed off. No active ingredient does anything useful in forty seconds. You are paying a premium for a compound you are about to rinse down the sink.

VERDICT Buy the cheapest one that does not leave your skin tight

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### The twelve-step routine

ACTIVELY HARMFUL

Not merely a waste. Layering essences, toners, acids, serums and oils breaks the barrier, and broken-barrier skin looks older, not fresher — red, sensitised, dull. This is the single most common self-inflicted skin problem I see.

Three products, used consistently, will beat twelve products used enthusiastically. Every time.

VERDICT The most expensive thing in this chapter, and it costs you results as well as money

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## THE ARITHMETIC

The one-off purchases above that I bought and stopped come to about **\$500**. The eye creams, bought again and again for the better part of a decade, come to something like that a second time. The subscriptions I eventually cancelled — collagen, biotin, oral hyaluronic acid — ran at **\$81 a month** between them. Over the years I ran them, the whole lot is comfortably **north of three thousand dollars**, and that is the conservative version.

The list in chapter twelve — the things that actually worked — has two items on it that always cost money, and between them they come to sixty-five dollars a month at the very most. The other five cost nothing, or nothing beyond what you already spend.

## WHERE THE OPTIONAL THINGS GO, IF YOU KEEP THEM

**Niacinamide:** morning, after the vitamin C or instead of it, under the moisturiser. Once a day is enough.

**Azelaic acid:** morning, after the rinse and after the vitamin C if you keep it, under moisturiser and sunscreen. It sits happily alongside a retinoid at night if you would rather put it there.

**Glycolic or lactic acid:** night, after cleansing, *instead of* the retinoid — never with it. Twice a week at most, and out altogether once the retinoid is nightly.

Nothing else in this chapter needs a slot, because nothing else in this chapter earned one.

## IF YOU ONLY DO ONE THING

Go and look at your bathroom shelf with this chapter open. Anything graded weak or lower that you are currently paying for monthly: cancel it tonight, while you are looking at it. That single act will very likely return the price of this book several times over.

## WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

# You have just read one chapter of eighteen.

That chapter is the money. The rest of the book is what to do instead, in the order I do it, and how long to wait before deciding it has failed.

- **My whole day, in order.** 6:40am to 10pm — the order is most of the value.
- **The twelve-week retinoid ramp.** Which one to buy, at what strength, and the schedule nobody gives you.
- **Your first ninety days.** Three habits, not twelve, with a thirteen-week tracker built to match.
- **Starting at forty, fifty or sixty.** What to protect first in each decade.
- **The five expensive mistakes.** The patterns that cost me years rather than money.
- **The bad week protocol,** and the whole routine on two tear-out pages.



## Everything I do at fifty-two, in the order I do it.

84 pages · 18 chapters

PDF for phone, tablet or print

Includes a ninety-day tracker

### THE COMPLETE AGELESS BLUEPRINT · \$27

Less than one month of the collagen in this chapter. If it is not what you hoped for, email me within fourteen days and I will send your money back in full.

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A personal account, not medical advice. Prescription retinoids and hormone therapy are decisions for a clinician who knows your history. Prices are what I paid, in US dollars.