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[1]*In vivo study results immediately after 1 use* *In vivo study results after 28 days*

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**KITTY LIN**
Managing Editor
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# You're a Force to Be Reckoned With

*Skin Inc.'s* Managing Editor Kitty Lin shares what's on her mind this month.

They say that March comes in like a lion and out like a lamb, but I'm feeling like we can sit a while more with the lion this year.

This issue had me thinking a lot about power; the incredible forces championing our industry, the wide array of tools at our disposal to empower us in the work we do and how pros are constantly innovating new ways of rising to challenges.

If the products on the market aren't making the grade, estheticians are taking this show to private label, and crafting an invaluable piece for their business-building journey while at it.

Skin, spa and wellness professionals are coming together and mentoring the next generation, passing down advice, techniques and insight that just can't be neatly packaged in traditional classroom settings.

Perhaps most importantly, we're inspiring each other through our own strengths; our resilience, our grace, our courage, sustained in the face of adversity and throughout the work we do in service of others.

The goal for this issue is, as always, to be a resource to you, the professional. More than that, though, I want this issue to stand as a reminder of this great industry, the wonderful people we share it with and of our strength, both that of which exists in ourselves and each other.

Always wishing you well,

Kitty Lin



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# Is It Too Early For Spring Flowers?

By Kitty Lin

**2026 is already blurring past us, and as we all slowly emerge from hibernation, it's tempting to see what exciting things await us once we all thaw out. So, what sorts of things will be catching our eye as we move into the warm months?**



**1 Custom light therapy devices**

While LED therapy is only getting better in 2026, with devices adopting 1072nm lasers for deeper penetration and more precision, the industry has spoken, and perusing devices isn't cutting it anymore. Private label care is the latest in business strategies, marrying the remediation of product-need gaps with marketing through a memorable, curated brand experience, and now devices may follow suit. For those frustrated with the array of devices on the market, some have turned to working with Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs) that are tailored to their needs, with customizable wavelengths, diode count and designs. Personalization isn't reserved for clients!

***sculptparco.com***

**2 Consumers are feeling chatty**

Conversational commerce is the latest in automated shopping tools. While AI is being increasingly integrated into shopping experiences to analyze purchase history and goals, compiling targeted recommendations, we're graduating past typing in prompts or feeding in data manually (I mean, what are we, pilgrims?) and using AI-powered voice assistants to more conveniently obtain these specialized suggestions. Look, ma; no hands!

***voxauria.com***

**3 "Most skin care doesn't work"**

A common, but troubling, misconception that's being echoed by frustrated consumers everywhere. While this doesn't have a specific brand or product tied to it, this is still definitely on our radar. Educating clients not just in ingredients and products, but in what a reasonable timeline looks like for their goals, the dangers of overtreating skin and how they can verify certain claims like"clean" and"natural" can go a long way in restoring skin care's good name.

**4 I-beauty is going global(er)**

The latest in Asian beauty to come to our neck of the woods, Indian beauty further centers holistic wellness in the broader beauty conversation while adding its specific cultural flair. "Desi hacks" are going to help traditional, natural ingredients like ghee spike in popularity. In makeup, we'll be seeing bold, expressive uses of color; blush will become a major tool for giving faces a more lifted, sculpted appearance and foundation tones will move to become more inclusive of darker skin types.

***shankara.com***

**5 Back to the barrier basics**

Now that they know about the barrier, they're never letting it go. Consumers will be trying to take the simplest route to barrier health, which means going back to the ingredients foundational to it. Make sure your business is well stocked with ceramides, peptides, glycerin and squalene.

***302skincare.com***

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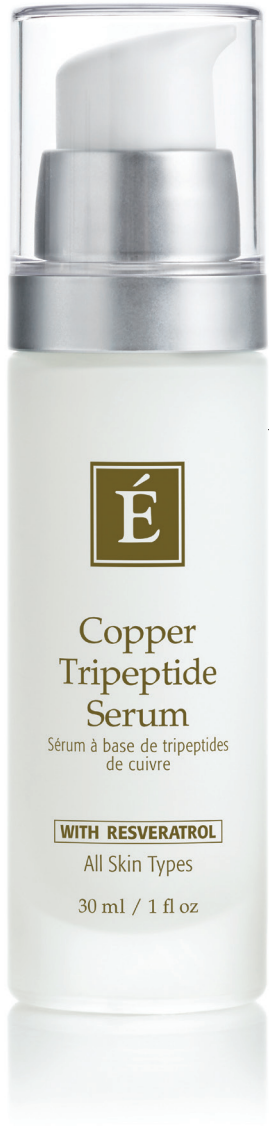
# The Gold Standard of Skin Care

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***website.com***

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# Dr. Alexes Hazen

By Kitty Lin



Dr. Alexes Hazen

**There have been a lot of big waves in the industry and the larger economy recently.**

**Aesthetics is less literally surgical, but moving with more surgical precision than ever before. At a time where consumers are looking for ways to spot credible brands—through a proven track record of clinical tests, the endorsement of medical professionals, a history of noticeable results and what have you—we're seeing a pattern of tastemakers and industry champions: women medical professionals, specifically surgeons. This trend in who's debuting new brands in the market is specific, but no less potent; so what is driving such a specific momentum?**

"People are more interested in the info and the science in skin care in general, which propels the industry forward," says Dr. Alexes Hazen, board-certified plastic surgeon and founder of Zen Essentials. "[Additionally], women who started their careers in the nineties are peaking now. They've accrued a lot of knowledge and power, so they can move the needle a bit. There's also a lot of permission around this: people are aging in the workforce. They want to look and feel good, and they want to feel good for longer."

Hazen makes a salient point: until all too recently, positions as movers and shakers within the industry were predominantly occupied by men. Leadership roles, positions in academia, even media and publishers—all men. That's since changed, as has the nature of the anti-aging movement and skin care overall.

Culturally, we've abandoned the purely superficial pursuit of aestheticism and elevated our goal to be more about preserving the integrity of our skin and bodies, so that full-body health can be reflected through attaining and sustaining our aesthetic goals. This convergence has largely contributed to the marriage between the medical and what we curate for our skin routines.

Moreover, having a consumer body that's invested in the journey, not just the results, makes a huge difference too. The more accessible it is to be educated about your skin and aesthetic goals, and the easier it is to find respectable brands, the more convenient it is for consumers to choose them. A brand with a medical pedigree to go with it takes a lot of the heavy lifting off the consumer when it comes to validating the brand. Additionally, uniting the purchase of products with semi-regular appointments helps. While convenience has been a primary consideration for consumers for a bit now (remember the TV dinner era?), the way we approach it has evolved. Choosing healthy, safe and reliable options should be convenient, not sacrificed for the sake of convenience.

With many women operating in the workforce these days, and women historically being the primary demographic when it comes to all things beauty-related, quality-convenience was always a foregone conclusion for the market.

Hazen draws on her own experiences, and the differences between how she and her parents thought. "My parents didn't care about convenience at all, and they felt the same with beauty products, but people my age care a lot."

This era of heightened consumer awareness has changed the way brands interact with consumers, and the rise of K-beauty is a perfect example.

Hazen reiterates her earlier point on the educated consumer: "People wanted to learn about Korean products and what made k-beauty different. It's the educated consumer propelling the industry forward."

## From one movement springs many more

Society's ability to engage with conversations surrounding beauty, skin care and aesthetics has also paved the way for more comprehensive inclusivity. Beauty products now target a wider age range and are less gendered. The industry understands that women of all ages are invested in beauty and wellness, and that men are too. Many partners share products in their regimen, and with men feeling more empowered to enjoy

*Background: Image by Polina Kovaleva at Pexels; Image courtesy of Dr. Alexes Hazen*



the benefits of investing in skin, like noticing fewer breakouts, they find a more straightforward path to looking and feeling better.

The more health-conscious mindset of beauty consumers (particularly Gen Z-ers, who have championed other health-related cultural shifts like the sober-curious movements and more diversified, devoted gym routines, to name a couple) has also contributed to the growth of the non-toxic and "clean" beauty movements.

The modern consumer is learning to make heads and tails of labels, and is collaborating more closely with their estheticians and doctors to improve their label literacy: it can be daunting to see 10 ingredients that all sound like chemicals and not recognize any of them. For those who feel more comfortable with "natural" ingredients (whatever that actually means!), consumers should understand that even ingredients that align with their definition of natural may still sound like some of the chemicals they're trying to avoid. Consumers are more educated about what they're putting in and on their bodies than ever before, but to Hazen's point, they still don't want a research project every time they need to buy a face cream.

Consumers may also lack an understanding of what toxicity means in beauty; while some ingredients can cause cancer or make people sick, even smaller adverse reactions like irritation or redness should be included when it comes to product and ingredient education, and working with clients who crave "clean" beauty.

## What does the "medification" of skin care mean for professionals in skin and spa?

As with all things, where specific professionals, services and devices fit depends on the intention of the business. Places run by medical professionals tend to specialize in specific demands or concerns, contingent on the clientele. Those looking to get facials are looking to resolve skin issues, or maintain their current skin health—the need to see a medical professional versus an esthetician is different, even if the two roles are operating in a closer vicinity these days. If someone's pursuing a massage, there's a more experiential and connective element to what they're seeking out that they simply won't find at a filler appointment, or a laser treatment, and on the flipside, those pursuing body treatments at a medspa tend to have a clear aesthetic goal, where the holistic benefits of a more traditional spa experience are less of a priority, if at all.

Hazen confirms that as a general rule of thumb, if a client's seeking a procedure, they should make sure they're going to a medspa with a medical director.

The array of roles in aesthetics is nuanced and varied at all the different levels. When estheticians build out their network, they should take into account what new connections can bring to their clients' broader wellness journeys, be it through client education, service referrals or other secondary priorities, like sustainability efforts or "clean" beauty.

Hazen also points out that there's plenty of ground for professionals of all types to cover when it comes to the modern beauty market: men feel more confident in beauty spaces now, allowing professionals to crack an under-explored market wide open. Young people are being more proactive when it comes to their acne, because having "troublesome" skin is difficult to hide, and more than that, consumers are becoming fed up with the idea of having to hide to preserve their confidence.

Medical professionals and estheticians are finding themselves on similar turf because historically, surgery was what worked for more ambitious aesthetic goals. With technology getting smarter and less invasive, service providers no longer need to subject patients to going under the knife, depending on what results they're looking for.

As for what's coming next, Hazen predicts more synergistic combinations, as more professionals train to become savvy in the latest tech. Longevity will remain huge, especially as the industry masters reversing aging at the cellular level, and the current clinical moment in the industry? That's sticking around, too, as clients and professionals alike start thinking of beauty and aesthetics as accomplishing something substantive.

More medical professionals are going to start donning business hats along with their stethoscopes, as business becomes a language spoken by more professionals across various industries. As we rush to commodify, we'll see even more of the creative web bridging professions as brand partnerships take off, influencers continue to grab marketing by the horns and platforms like Instagram continue to nourish the thriving landscape of e-commerce.

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**Kitty Lin** is the managing editor of *Skin Inc.*



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# External EXPOSOME INFLUENCES on the Skin and Its Barrier

By Erin Madigan-Fleck

The exposome defines and encompasses all environmental exposures an individual encounters throughout their lifetime and the ways these exposures influence biological functions and health outcomes. It comprises both external and internal factors—such as chemical, physical, biological and social influences—that may affect health. The skin's exposome specifically pertains to the total environmental exposures that can lead to or modify skin conditions. Environmental factors such as ultraviolet (UV) exposures, pollution, diet, stress and smoking adversely affect the skin by inducing oxidative stress, degrading collagen and elastin, weakening the skin barrier and promoting inflammation. This leads to premature signs of aging, including wrinkles and hyperpigmentation, as well as dryness, dullness, sensitivity, redness and exacerbation of skin conditions such as acne, eczema and hyperpigmentation. It is essential to recognize that these factors often interact synergistically—for example, pollution exposure is exacerbated by UV radiation, which accelerates skin damage beyond the impact of any individual factor.[1, 2]

## Revisiting Barrier Basics

The skin constitutes the body's largest organ, serving as a vital safeguard between internal organs and the external environment. From a structural standpoint, the epidermis serves as a resilient physical barrier that prevents the ingress of microorganisms and potential toxins while preserving moisture and essential nutrients within its layers. The epidermis is an active system characterized by continuous proliferation and differentiation and comprises keratinocytes, melanocytes and immunocompetent cells. The intricate composition of the stratum corneum is vital to the skin's barrier function, with corneocytes embedded within a matrix of multiple lamellar lipid layers. The skin also displays distinctive physical and chemical properties, thereby creating an environment conducive to specific microorganisms.

The interaction among the skin microbiome, lipids and the skin barrier function is notably complex, with each element contributing significantly to the maintenance of cutaneous health and the prevention of disease.

The commonly cited "skin barrier" primarily refers to the stratum corneum (SC), which preserves skin integrity. Essential constituents of the SC include corneocytes, intercellular lipid lamellae, corneodesmosomes and tight junctions. The integrity of the skin barrier relies on three principal components: lipids within the stratum corneum (SC), natural moisturizing factors (NMFs) and the acidic pH of the SC surface. The maintenance of skin acidity is achieved through three internal mechanisms: free fatty acids derived from phospholipids; trans-urocanic acid produced from filaggrin (FLG) and the sodium-hydrogen exchanger (NHE), a membrane protein that employs the sodium gradient to facilitate ion transport and support essential cellular functions, such as the regulation of intracellular ph.

The stratum corneum (SC) maintains an acidic pH, which is crucial for preserving a healthy skin barrier. An acidic environment within the SC enhances the activity of enzymes essential for ceramide synthesis, thereby promoting skin health. Conversely, an elevated pH may heighten the risk of skin infections, reduce the activity of lipid-processing enzymes, hinder the repair of the permeability barrier and compromise the structural integrity and cohesion of the SC. Additionally, this acidic environment fosters the proliferation of beneficial microorganisms while inhibiting pathogenic ones. Such a biological equilibrium reinforces the integrity of the skin barrier by modulating enzymes responsible for degrading SC proteins and supports skin hydration through the regulation of enzymes involved in NMF synthesis. Natural moisturizing factors (NMFs) are inherent components of the skin and are crucial in sustaining hydration. These elements comprise amino acids, lactate and urea, among others. NMFs facilitate the attraction of water molecules to the skin's surface and interact with lipids to establish a barrier that mitigates trans epidermal water loss (TEWL). A deficiency in NMF levels may result in skin dehydration, dryness and potential impairment of the barrier function.

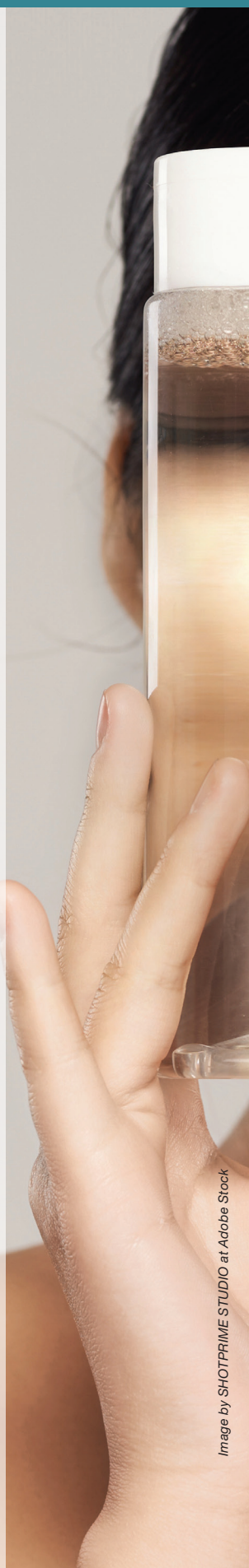
There has been a growing focus on protecting the skin's surface with products labeled as"barrier repair" solutions. However, emphasis should not be placed on a'barrier repair' product as the sole resolution for a compromised skin.

Underlying skin issues may have broad implications for the barrier, potentially involving subclinical factors that may justify dermatological or medical intervention. It is also crucial to evaluate complete ingredient decks and skin compatibility, as well as the type and frequency of esthetic procedures performed, with skin homeostasis as the primary objective. The stability of the physiological barrier depends on the complex interplay among epidermal functions, microbiome interactions and the supply of essential lipids. Crucially, supporting overall skin health begins with a thorough assessment of the client's skin and their'exposome,' which encompasses exposures, lifestyle, medications and their history of product and aesthetic services use.[3,4]

## Skin Barrier Super Stars

### *CORNEOCYTES*

Corneocytes are keratinocytes that have completed their final differentiation stage. They retain keratin filaments within a filaggrin matrix, and a cornified lipid envelope replaces their plasma membrane. These flat cells form the stratum corneum, which is organized in a brick-and-mortar pattern within a



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lipid-rich extracellular matrix. They are essential to the skin's physical defense, with keratin networks providing structure and flexibility. Embedded in a lipid-rich matrix, corneocytes help maintain barrier function and prevent water loss.

### *INTERCELLULAR LIPIDS (LAMELLAE)*

As keratinocyte differentiation progresses, accumulated lipids are stored in specialized organelles called lamellar bodies (granules or Odland bodies). These lipids are released from the granules at the boundary between the topmost granular cells and the bottom of the stratum corneum, entering the intercellular space. During their passage into the stratum corneum, the lipids interact with hydrolytic enzymes, yielding a mixture of ceramides, cholesterol and fatty acids that fill the intercellular spaces. These intercellular lipids form the skin's essential permeability barrier. The lipids present in the stratum corneum include ceramides, cholesterol and free fatty acids. Their primary function is to prevent trans-epidermal water loss (TEWL) by establishing a barrier that retains moisture. When this lipid barrier is compromised—due to external factors such as harsh soaps or internal causes such as genetics—TEWL increases, potentially resulting in dry and irritated skin.

### *CORNEODESMOSOMES*

The thickness of the stratum corneum remains relatively constant due to a balance between new cell production and the removal of old cells. Corneodesmosomes function as the primary intercellular adhesive structures within this layer. They originate from desmosomes situated in the most superficial region of the stratum granulosum of the epidermis. A significant distinction from desmosomes is the presence of corneodesmosin in their extracellular domains. Upon the complete degradation of these extracellular components, desquamation occurs.

### *TIGHT JUNCTIONS*

Tight junctions (TJs) are vital multiprotein complexes located within the epidermis. They serve as a"gate" that seals the intercellular spaces between keratinocytes, regulating the translocation of water, ions and solutes. Consequently, they constitute a critical element of the skin's barrier system

alongside the stratum corneum. Tight junctions oversee the paracellular pathway between cells and are indispensable for maintaining homeostasis. They are integral to epithelial and endothelial tissues by sealing intercellular spaces to establish selective barriers. These barriers govern the movement of substances between body compartments, prevent the leakage of fluids, ions and microorganisms, and help maintain cell polarity.

### *AQUAPORINS*

Another essential element of skin hydration is the presence of aquaporins, which are proteins responsible for facilitating water transport within the skin. These channels assist in regulating water



movement and maintaining osmotic equilibrium, particularly in dry environments. Although they are not as extensively discussed as lipids or filaggrin, aquaporins are increasingly recognized in dermatological research for their potential to enhance moisture retention.

### *FILAGGRIN*

A key barrier element is the multifunctional epidermal protein filaggrin (FLG). FLG originates from a large precursor called pro-filaggrin, which is contained within the stratum granulosum keratinocytes. As keratinocytes undergo cornification, pro-filaggrin is enzymatically processed into deiminated filaggrin molecules. These molecules are dispersed within corneocytes and partially cross-link to the cornified envelopes. Ultimately, free amino acids produced from filaggrin breakdown constitute the primary component of the natural moisturizing factor (NMF) in the stratum corneum (SC). They exhibit an excellent ability to retain water and help maintain the SC's low pH.

### *SEBUM*

The primary lipids present on the skin's surface are essential for maintaining skin health and functionality. The skin's stratum corneum constitutes a lipid- and protein-rich, cornified outer layer that encompasses hair follicles and sebaceous glands. These structures supply vital lipids, antimicrobial peptides, enzymes, salts and other compounds. Its acidity and high oxygen content characterize the environment, and it features a distinctive and complex mixture of lipids not found elsewhere in the human body. Features such as the acidic pH and barrier function not only affect the skin's appearance but also its overall barrier integrity and microbial homeostasis. Sebum possesses natural antibacterial properties and can exert both pro- and anti-inflammatory effects by regulating harmful substances and xenobiotics.

### *MICROBIOME*

Microbiota are not confined to the skin surface; they also reside within hair follicles, sebaceous glands, sweat glands and even the dermis. The presence of bacteria in the dermis supports evidence that cells beneath the outer skin layer respond to commensal microbial products. The skin's microbiome, composed of billions of microorganisms, interacts intricately with epidermal lipids that form the outer barrier, playing a crucial role in maintaining skin integrity and function. The skin serves as a primary site of microbial-host interactions. It features a complex landscape rich in lipids and proteins, along with follicles and glands that establish distinct physical and chemical environments. Bacterial colonization on human skin is vital for defense mechanisms and support of both innate and adaptive immune responses. The composition of the microbiome is meticulously regulated by factors such as epidermal pH and the skin's immune system. Consequently, the efficacy of the epidermal barrier depends on the interconnected communication among the chemical barrier, the immune system and the microbiota. Furthermore, the skin microbiome transmits environmental signals, including xenobiotics, to the skin's immune network.[5,6,7,8]

## The External Exposome and Trans Barrier Influences

Eco-biological principles view the skin as a dynamic ecosystem that interacts continuously with its environment, underscoring the need to protect its natural resources and functions. These principles



*Image by Ulia Koltyrina at Adobe Stock*



examine how cells communicate and interact both internally and externally. As the skin is the primary interface with the environment, it depends on ecosystem biodiversity, lifestyle choices, host factors and environmental conditions to sustain its balance. The decline in global biodiversity and shrinking natural habitats can reduce microbial diversity, potentially disrupting the relationship between the skin barrier and microbial communities. This loss affects microbial habitats and may lead to dysbiosis, thereby increasing the risk of inflammatory skin conditions. Barrier abnormalities and pathogen colonization can also occur in many other inflammatory skin diseases, including seborrheic dermatitis, stasis dermatitis and rosacea, as well as more serious skin bacterial infections:

- Carbuncles
- Cellulitis
- Ecthyma
- Erysipelas
- Erythrasma
- Folliculitis
- Furuncles
- Impetigo
- Lymphadenitis
- Lymphangitis
- Necrotizing skin infections
- Staphylococcal scalded skin syndrome

**Bacteria multiply in specific opportunistic circumstances:**

- Barrier dysfunction compromised skin
- Climate and temperature changes
- Compromised immunity.
- Decline of microbiota
- Extreme PH disturbances
- Injuries, surgery
- Medications – topical and systemic
- Pathogen infiltrates
- Poor Hygiene

**Skin Bacteria:**

- Acinetobacteria species (small numbers)
- Alpha -hemolytic and nonhemolytic Streptococcus
- Brevibacterium
- Corynebacterium
- Corynebacterium minutissmim
- Cutibacterium acne ( *formerly Propionibacterium acnes)* porphyrins

- Dermabacterium
- Diptheroid
- Folliculitis Impetigo
- Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) – Antibiotic resistant – may be community acquired or (CA-MRSA) or hospital acquired HA-MRSA)
- Micrococcus species
- Neisseriae species (nonpathogenic)
- Peptoststreptococcus species
- Proteobacteria - Escherichia, Salmonella, Vibrio, Helicobacter, Yersinia, Legionellae
- Pseudomonas aeruginosa (hospitals)
- Staphylococcus aureus
- Staphylococcus epidermidis
- Staphylococcus warneri
- Streptococcus[9,10]

Environmental factors induce changes in the skin that may attract immune cells, which mediate local and systemic responses to maintain homeostasis. The skin and its barrier are often exposed to a range of air pollutants, and their effects vary with pollutant characteristics and the intensity and duration of exposure. Moreover, the mechanisms responsible for skin damage vary with the skin's interactions with pollutants or co-pollutants. Generally, air pollution induces an oxidative stress response in the skin, triggering inflammation that contributes to both dermatological and systemic pathologies. Prolonged UVR exposure can intensify these health effects through harmful synergistic impacts. Additionally, air pollution may trigger or worsen various skin and systemic conditions, including premature skin aging, skin cancers (such as melanoma, squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) and basal cell carcinoma (BCC), inflammatory skin disorders (like atopic dermatitis (AD), airborne contact dermatitis (ABCD), allergic contact dermatitis and psoriasis), as well as acne, alopecia and pigmentary issues such as vitiligo, melasma, post-inflammatory pigment changes and various neurodermatoses.

Ultraviolet radiation (UVR) is the most harmful environmental factor affecting skin health, causing photodamage in sun-exposed areas over time. This damage accelerates skin aging and raises the risk of skin cancer. Solar UVR reaching Earth primarily comprises UVB (290–320 nm) and UVA (320–400 nm), which affect the skin and other tissues differently. UVB damages tissues primarily by absorbing chromophores, such as DNA and proteins, thereby inducing mutations and generating reactive oxygen species (ROS). UVA mainly causes damage by generating ROS and reactive nitrogen species (RNS), with less absorption by cellular chromophores.

Controversy surrounds the harmful effects of blue light from the most energetic part of the visible spectrum on skin, its barrier and circadian rhythms. With the widespread use of electronic devices, light pollution is increasingly concerning for human health.

Exposure to blue light from screens (456 nm) and LEDs during day and night is under growing scrutiny. Unlike UV rays, blue light penetrates deeper into the subcutaneous tissue, and there is strong evidence linking it to retinal damage and degeneration, primarily through the induction of *ferroptosis*—a form of cell death driven by iron-induced lipid peroxidation.

We encounter various chemicals and compounds daily, including radiation, airborne particles, vapors, gases and water pollutants often found in personal care products. Many industrial, household and personal items emit chemical vapors or contain substances such as synthetic chemicals, phthalates, formaldehyde, PVC, BBA, BPS, VOCs, nitrate radicals, acetaldehyde, benzene, polybrominated diphenyl ethers (PBDEs), chloroform, triclosan, D-limonene, terpenoids, xylene, ethylene glycol ethers and more. A single chemical agent can enter the human body through inhalation, ingestion or dermal contact.

Detrimental chemical exposures also include nicotine, liquid cigarette and vaping compounds, which not only impact the user but also people and the environment around them. These exposures, particularly from lipophilic polyaromatic hydrocarbons, such as particulate matter (PM) and cigarette smoke, can disrupt cellular homeostasis by generating ROS/RNS, either independently or after UVA exposure. Their small size enables them to enter mitochondria, thereby promoting ROS production and mitochondrial damage. PMs also possess oxidative potential due to metals such as iron and copper, which catalyze reactions. Ozone can generate 4HNE by oxidizing fatty acids in the skin, thereby creating peroxides that deplete antioxidants such as vitamin C, glutathione, uric acid and vitamin E.



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Smoking contributes to comedogenesis through its chemical constituents and toxic by-products, which cause vascular changes and oxidative stress. Nicotine induces vasoconstriction, reducing blood flow and promoting localized hypoxia, which in turn promotes the overgrowth of Cutibacterium acnes by disrupting the skin microbiome. It also increases ROS levels, oxidizing sebum lipids, such as squalene, to squalene monohydroperoxide—a compound associated with hyperkeratinization and comedone formation.

This oxidative stress depletes the skin of antioxidants, including α-tocopherol (vitamin E). It impairs mitochondrial function in keratinocytes and sebocytes, thereby altering sebum composition and contributing to pore blockage. The resulting form of non-inflammatory acne, known as atypical post-adolescent acne (APAA) or "smoker's acne," mainly appears as closed comedones and microcysts rather than pustules.

E-cigarette liquids (e-liquids) are heated in the skin and mouth, and vaporization produces toxic by-products that generate reactive oxygen species (ROS) and free radicals, leading to oxidative damage. When heated at high temperatures, the solvent carriers—propylene glycol and glycerol—release volatile organic compounds. In addition to volatile organic compounds, e-liquids contain heavy metals such as lead, nickel and chromium, which the FDA deems potentially harmful upon absorption.

Although e-cigarettes contain lower levels of heavy metals compared to tobacco cigarettes, the heating element significantly increases exposure to nickel. Nickel is a typical contact allergen and toxic, with its toxicity linked to oxidative stress. Carbonyl compounds like acrolein and formaldehyde can damage mitochondrial function and induce lipid peroxidation. Acrolein, a reactive carbonyl compound, impairs mitochondrial function, whereas formaldehyde, a carcinogen, increases oxidative stress by elevating ROS and other free radicals that can generate endogenous formaldehyde. These reactive molecules can trigger lipid peroxidation, leading to lipid peroxide formation that may alter skin inflammation and immune responses, suggesting a potential link between e-cigarette use and the development or worsening of skin conditions. Environmental pollution also encompasses a range of ground-level pollutants,

including carbon monoxide (CO), lead (Pb), nitrogen dioxide ($NO_2$), ozone ($O_3$), particulate matter (PM) and sulfur dioxide ($SO_2$). Ozone in the environment is considered highly toxic and among the most harmful airborne pollutants to human health due to its high reactivity with biological membranes. Approximately 90% of ozone naturally resides in the stratosphere, where it filters UV radiation before it reaches the Earth's surface.

Ground-level ozone forms as photochemical smog, produced by reactions involving sunlight, nitrogen oxides, and hydrocarbons emitted by vehicle exhaust. It is essential to distinguish this form of ozone from that used for medical treatments or aesthetic purposes, as the latter is produced via a corona discharge (electrical charge emitted by air, liquid, or gas). Damage to the skin caused by atmospheric ozone involves direct interaction with and oxidation of polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFAs) and lipids in the stratum corneum (SC), leading to the formation of aldehydes and reactive oxygen species (ROS), such as $H_2O_2$. These reactive mediators can propagate ozone-induced toxicity, impair the skin barrier and exacerbate injury deeper within the skin layers.

The predominant route of chemical absorption is direct contact, primarily via diffusion. Passive diffusion entails the permeation of the chemical through the stratum corneum, entry into the epidermis and ultimately into the dermis, where it can be transported systemically via the dermal vasculature. Frequently, chemicals remain undetected during the absorption process because they gradually accumulate within tissues, and this accumulation may only become evident through clinical signs such as rash, edema, erythema, pigmentation changes, eczema or other dermatological indications. Chemicals with a low molecular weight (less than 500 Dalton), which are soluble in both aqueous and lipophilic environments, tend to penetrate the skin more rapidly and effectively than compounds that are predominantly lipophilic or hydrophilic. Nonetheless, evidence suggests that compromised skin integrity or barrier dysfunction—induced by physical or chemical damage—can enhance dermal absorption by disrupting the lipid and protein structure of the stratum corneum, thereby facilitating systemic absorption of chemicals. This process may also involve larger molecules, including proteins, metal compounds or hazardous nanoparticles.

The rate and extent of absorption of a chemical is subject to the following factors:

- Integrity of the skin
- Barrier function
- Location of the exposure
- Water content of the stratum corneum
- Concentration of the chemical on the surface
- Duration of the exposure
- The degree of surface area exposed to the chemical

Dermal exposure to chemicals and solvents has been shown to reduce the skin's barrier function by altering lipid and protein structures of the stratum corneum, thereby promoting systemic uptake of the solvent itself or other chemicals.[11-19]

Prevention is the most effective approach to managing skin barrier concerns. To minimize potential, consider initiating sound strategies and management to mitigate the impact of environmental exposures that may be harmful to the skin and skin barrier:

- Education and knowledge—recognize and be aware of exposome triggers.
- Be observant of your exposures and how to minimize them.
- Evaluate internal and external oxidative support against ROS and free radical damage—topical antioxidants, nutrient-dense foods, supplements.
- Protection—SPF, blocking devices (eyeglasses, screens, etc.)
- Your primary focus? Maintaining functional integrity of the skin.
- Avoid barrier-disruptive agents (surfactants, acids, etc.)
- Subscribe to proven, research-backed ingredients that support the skin barrier and skin homeostasis.



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# COOLIFTING: The Express Hydration & Rejuvenation Treatment Revolutionizing Skin Care

By Leah Lynch

Usually, the thought of icy cold air blowing across my cheeks as winter lingers would send shivers down my spine—I want sunshine, warmth and comfort. However, there's something remarkably refreshing, deeply hydrating and genuinely transformative about CooLifting, the innovative express facial treatment that's quickly becoming one of the most talked-about services in skin care today.

CooLifting is a cutting-edge, non-invasive aesthetic treatment that harnesses the power of low-temperature carbon dioxide ($CO_2$) and hyaluronic acid to deliver immediate hydration, lift and radiance—with no downtime and no needles. At its core, CooLifting combines cryogenic technology with potent skincare actives to give clients an instant glow and a visibly refreshed complexion in just minutes.

## How CooLifting Works

The secret to CooLifting's effectiveness lies in its unique delivery system. A special device—often referred to as a "CooLifting gun"—emits a powerful mist of $CO_2$ at low temperature and high pressure. This cryogenic blast, combined with a hyaluronic acid-rich serum, creates a controlled thermal shock effect that increases microcirculation and allows active ingredients to penetrate deeply into the skin.

This process accomplishes several things at once:

- Deeply hydrating the skin
- Delivering nutrients and serums more effectively
- Increasing blood flow and oxygenation
- Stimulating collagen production
- Reducing the appearance of fine lines and wrinkles

The way the $CO_2$ mist works, the skin responds immediately—giving clients exactly what they want: tightening, plumping and glowing after just one session.

CooLifting is easy and fast, just twist on the $CO_2$ and pop in your serum of choice. The original formulation is focused on hydration and CoolClear, which adds in vitamin C, kojic and glycolic acids, provides a vibrancy boost.

Once the machine is locked and loaded the gun will begin its timed application sequence and you simply hover the mist above the client's skin, evenly covering the whole face, keeping eyelids covered for 4–5 minutes.



The CooLifting gun allows for deeper penetration of actives.



## Instant Results, Zero Downtime

With such a short appointment time, CooLifting can be a total gold mine for businesses wanting to focus on express services or results-based offerings. Unlike more invasive procedures, it requires no downtime. Clients can walk in for a session that usually books for 15 minutes and immediately return to their daily activities. Since hyaluronic acid is gentle and generally well-tolerated by all skin types, this is an incredibly versatile treatment that can be applied to anyone and can be paired with other more aggressive treatments without overstimulating the skin.

Many people seek CooLifting as a stand-alone express service—perfect for busy lifestyles, lunch-break appointments or special occasions where an instant glow is desired. Beyond its convenience, it offers several key benefits:

- Immediate skin hydration and plumping
- Enhanced skin texture and tone
- Softening of fine lines and wrinkles
- Increased radiance and luminosity
- Collagen stimulation for longer-term benefits

*Clockwise from the top: Image courtesy of Leah Lynch; Image by volff at Adobe Stock*

## The Science Behind the Glow

The mechanism that makes CooLifting so effective is rooted in its innovative technology. When the $CO_2$ mist contacts the skin, it causes a localized increase in circulation and oxygen delivery. This microcirculation boost enhances nutrient supply and stimulates collagen and elastin production.

The hyaluronic acid used in the serum, known for its exceptional water-binding capacity, when driven deep into the dermis by the CooLifting device, rehydrates and plumps the skin from within, helping to smooth out fine lines and restore a more youthful texture.

## Versatility and Customization

CooLifting isn't limited to just one area or concern. Depending on how your spa chooses to position it, the treatment can be used on clients with pigment issues and acne, or deep dehydration and dryness. You can add on more service areas to your book of offerings as well, with additional treatments for the neck and chest, and even the back of the hands.

We hosted a tremendously successful event at our spa where we paired CooLifting with a biorevitalizing peel and cold plasma treatment, making it the ultimate red-carpet experience. Clients loved the results, and everyone booked a series of treatments to follow up!

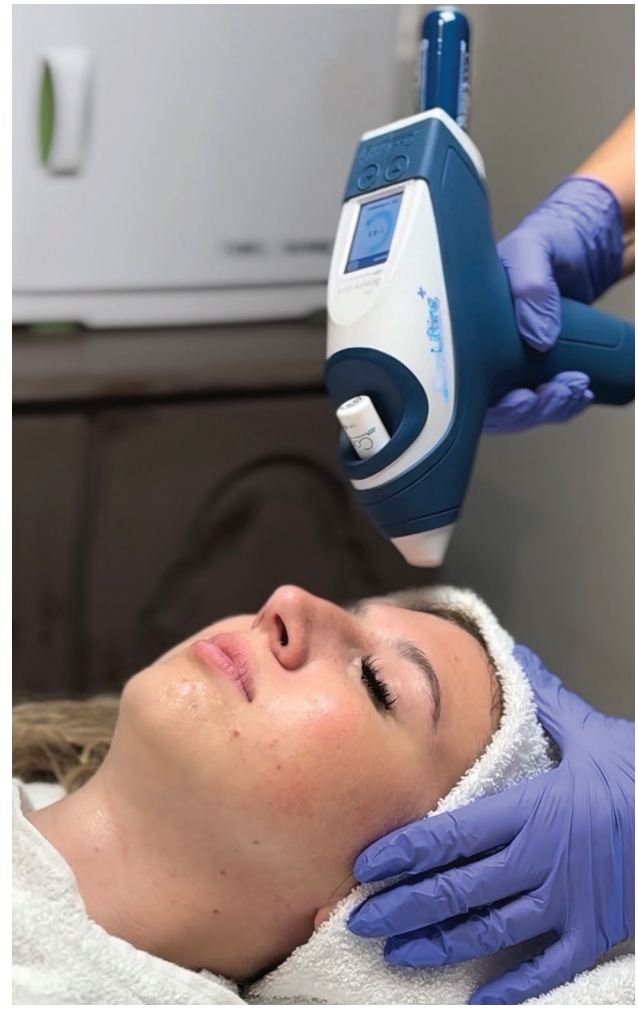
This versatility makes it ideal not just as an express service, but also as part of a layered approach to skin care—from standalone touch-ups to integrated facial plans.

## Perfect for Express & Event-Driven Business Models

Since CooLifting produces dramatic, visible results in minutes, it fits beautifully into express service business models where clients want maximum benefit in a minimal time commitment. You could build a whole business around it.

It's handheld and portable, and it's the kind of treatment that stands out at events and open houses because of the device's unique sound when its misting stream and cooling effect are in action. The spray, the sound, the gun and the glow, all heads in the area are turning to see—guests ask, *"What's that?"* & are immediately interested in learning more.

This feature makes CooLifting especially powerful for retail space demonstrations, event setups and express stations. Think minimal set-ups, curtains to divide, multiple services all buzzing; this is an express service model's dream come true! Or, bring this device into your cozy treatment room, combine with soft lighting, finishing masks or consider pairing it with other services (like exfoliating peels or cold plasma treatments). It can create an elevated, luxury experience that lives up to its reputation.



The novelty of CooLifting technology is just one way it can make a splash at events; it also travels well and emits a distinct sound when in action..

## Integrating CooLifting into Your Business Model

This service can be performed quickly and repeatedly, so it supports high throughput with excellent margins. Most spas will choose to offer this treatment as both a stand-alone express service and a lucrative add-on. We love to add CooLifting to our lash extension services as well!

At some spas, CooLifting is priced around $200 per 30 min session and $150 as a 15 min add-on, which positions it as a premium yet accessible option for clients seeking immediate results without extensive procedures.

*Image courtesy of Leah Lynch*



We're living in an age of fast-results and zero downtime, in other words, the age of CooLifting.

By offering CooLifting in express formats—even in flexible station setups with minimal square footage—you may:

- Serve more clients per day
- Increase impulse bookings—clients hear or see it and want it
- Boost overall service revenue
- Enhance client satisfaction with quick, glowing results

Since people can experience noticeable hydration and lifting in just minutes, many clients choose to return regularly—whether for maintenance or in combination with deeper rejuvenation treatments.

## Pairing CooLifting with Other Services

In practice, CooLifting can be a gateway treatment that introduces clients to deeper seasonal or corrective services (like microchanneling or injectables), while maintaining its role as a quick hit for hydration and glow.

It can be a great way to quickly introduce a client to what it is that you can offer in corrective skin care. When clients see what you can achieve for them in just minutes with the CooLifting, it immediately instills confidence and excitement in your expertise and the potential for their skin care journey with you. This opens further dialogue on how additional services in a series or adding other service areas like the neck/dec or incorporating peels, micro channeling, etc., will further help them with their skin care goals.

## Final Thoughts

CooLifting is a fan favorite for sure at Beautique Salon, Spa and Lash Lounge—our clients love and ask for it by name. As a business owner with 20 staff, I love that it's a non-invasive treatment that any one of my staff members can confidently offer to a client. It also gives our clients what they want: fast, visible tightening; hydration and radiance without needles or downtime. We can perform it as an express service for busy lifestyles or add it to our more relaxing full facial experiences, giving us multiple ways to market the device and sell through the services. CooLifting has been a huge draw and money maker at our events and really helps to create a fun focal point that grabs attention, while clients can immediately see the glow and improvement in their skin.

Whether you're introducing CooLifting as a solo express service or integrating it into a broader suite of advanced skin care offerings, its ability to combine practicality, science and visual allure makes it one of the most compelling services in aesthetic care today.



**Leah Lynch** is the owner of Beautique Salon, Spa & Lash Lounge in Newburyport, Massachusetts, and is an award-winning master lash artist, trainer, speaker and judge. Her business has won seven prestigious awards including "Best of Boston." A regular editorial contributor for numerous trade publications, Lynch is recognized internationally for her business acumen. Lynch is also the creator of Lash Mastery Academy, where lash artists can take their career to the next level by utilizing advanced materials, manuals and curriculums to become a trainer in their area.



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# DRY VS. DEHYDRATED SKIN:

## Understanding the Difference and How to Restore Hydration

By Shahma Ataullah

**When it comes to skin care, one of the most frequently made misunderstandings is the difference between dry skin and dehydrated skin. Although both conditions can present with tightness, dullness, fine lines and surface roughness, current dermatologic research clearly shows that their underlying mechanisms are not the same. Dry skin is a skin type defined by chronically low sebum production, which compromises the lipid barrier and reduces the skin's ability to retain moisture. Dehydrated skin, by contrast, is a transient condition characterized by insufficient water content within the epidermis and can occur in any skin type, including oily skin. The differentiator is therefore not appearance, but sebaceous activity and barrier lipid availability, which directly influence water retention and transepidermal water loss.**



Hydration is necessary for barrier function and for maintaing elasticity.

## Understand the Anatomy of the Skin

The skin is composed of multiple cell types, yet all cells share a common internal structure. Each cell contains cytoplasm, which is primarily made up of water along with proteins, lipids, nucleic acids, polysaccharides, ions and salts. Water represents the largest component, accounting for approximately 80-85% of cellular content. When cells are deprived of adequate water, they begin to shrink, disrupting normal cellular function. This cellular dehydration compromises skin integrity and manifests clinically as flakiness, dullness, loss of firmness and the early formation of expression lines.

## Why Our Skin Needs Hydration

You may not realize it, but hydration plays a crucial role in protecting and regulating your skin. Your skin requires hydration as you age because the barrier function, which helps the skin retain moisture, can break down due to environmental damage or a lack of water intake.

## Factors of Dehydration

There are multiple factors contributing to dehydration, those intrinsic (lack of water, aging and diet), and those extrinsic (environmental conditions, weather, harsh products, lifestyle and skin barrier damage).

Whatever you know to be obstacles for your clients, dehydrated skin can be easily fixed in many ways.

- **Hydration:** Keeping the body well hydrated by drinking adequate amounts of filtered water is fundamental to maintaining skin hydration. Proper internal hydration supports cellular volume, nutrient transport and metabolic function, all of which directly influence skin plumpness and elasticity. While topical products address surface hydration, sufficient water intake ensures that skin cells receive the internal moisture required to function optimally, supporting a healthier barrier, improved resilience and a more radiant appearance over time.
- **Lifestyle changes:** Lifestyle choices play a significant role in skin hydration. Excessive caffeine intake, alcohol consumption and smoking contribute to systemic dehydration and disrupt fluid balance, which negatively affects skin function. Reducing coffee and alcohol intake, eliminating smoking and prioritizing regular water consumption help restore internal hydration, support cellular health and improve the skin's ability to maintain moisture over time.
- **Exfoliation:** Exfoliation is the process of removing dead skin cells from the surface, which helps skin care products absorb more effectively and keeps the complexion smooth. It's best to exfoliate no more than twice a week, since over-exfoliating can damage the skin barrier and lead to irritation or sensitivity. Morning is an ideal time because overnight cell turnover is higher, leaving more buildup of dead cells by the time you wake up. With the right routine, exfoliation enhances product penetration, supports a healthy barrier and maintains a fresh, radiant look.

## What Do We Need to Hydrate Our Skin?

These days, hyaluronic acid, ceramides, squalane and niacinamide are the skin quenchers to look out for.

1. **Hyaluronic acid (HA):** HA is also known as hyaluronan or hyaluronate. Hyaluronic acid is often produced by fermenting certain types of bacteria. Hyaluronic acid is available in many topical forms, like creams, gels, serums and even powders mixed with water. Applied to the skin, it helps reduce wrinkles and fine lines by boosting hydration. Injectable fillers with hyaluronic acid and collagen are approved to restore shape and volume, treating acne scars or enhancing lips.

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2. **Ceramide:** Ceramides are fats or lipids that make up about 50% of your epidermis, which is the outer layer of your skin, while synthetic ones are lab-made for skin care. As aging reduces the body's ability to replenish natural ceramides, synthetic versions are added to products. These help strengthen and restore the skin barrier by providing the needed boost. There are 12 types of ceramides, but these are the three most common ones typically found in over-the-counter serums, moisturizers, lotions, toners and creams:
   - **Ceramide 1, or ceramide EOS**
   - **Ceramide 3, or ceramide NP**
   - **Ceramide 6-II, or ceramide AP**

   Ceramides boost skin health when paired with emollients, humectants, and occlusives. Helpful ingredients include dimethicone, colloidal oatmeal, glycerin, hyaluronic acid, and shea butter. For best absorption, apply ceramide-rich moisturizers to damp skin within three minutes of cleansing.
3. **Squalane:** Squalane is a lightweight, skin-friendly oil naturally found in sebum. It's colorless and odorless—ideal for use in formulations. Squalene once came from shark liver but is now sustainably sourced from plants like olives and sugarcane. Squalane moisturizes in three ways—acting as an emollient, humectant and occlusive—while softening the skin and strengthening its barrier. It provides mild antioxidant and anti-inflammatory benefits, helping protect against stressors like UV exposure. Both note that squalane is lightweight and silky, absorbing quickly without greasy residue, leaving the skin smooth and soft.
4. **Niacinamide:** Niacinamide is a form of vitamin B3 that supports many essential functions in the body. It's produced when excess niacin is present or when the amino acid tryptophan is converted into it. It supports keratin production to maintain healthy skin and has been shown to strengthen, smooth and brighten the skin's appearance. Niacinamide strengthens the skin's lipid barrier, helping it retain moisture while blocking irritants. As a result, the skin becomes more hydrated and less sensitive.

## What Are the Best Facial Treatments for Keeping the Skin Hydrated?

Keep in mind that skin dehydration is a temporary condition in otherwise healthy individuals. It can be corrected efficiently with professional treatments such as oxygen facials, microneedling, glow facials, light chemical peels or HydraFacial treatments. These modalities restore water content, improve product absorption and support barrier function. However, to maintain and prolong these results, the consistent use of appropriate skin care products is essential, as discussed earlier. Without proper home care, even the most effective in-office treatments will deliver only short-term benefits.

## Conclusion

Distinguishing between dry skin and dehydrated skin is essential for effective skin care. Dry skin reflects a chronic lack of lipids, while dehydration is a temporary deficiency of water that can affect any skin type. Confusing the two leads to ineffective treatment and ongoing barrier disruption. At the cellular level, adequate hydration is fundamental to skin function, supporting elasticity, smooth texture and overall resilience.

Restoring hydration requires a combined internal and external approach. Proper water intake, lifestyle adjustments, gentle exfoliation and the consistent use of proven ingredients such as hyaluronic acid, ceramides, squalane and niacinamide work together to improve water retention and strengthen the skin barrier. Professional treatments can rapidly enhance hydration, but lasting results depend on disciplined home care. When hydration is addressed correctly, the skin performs better, looks healthier and shows fewer signs of premature aging.



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# Devices, Wellness and the



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# LUXURY MARKET



By Kitty Lin

The industry is in a whirlwind right now.

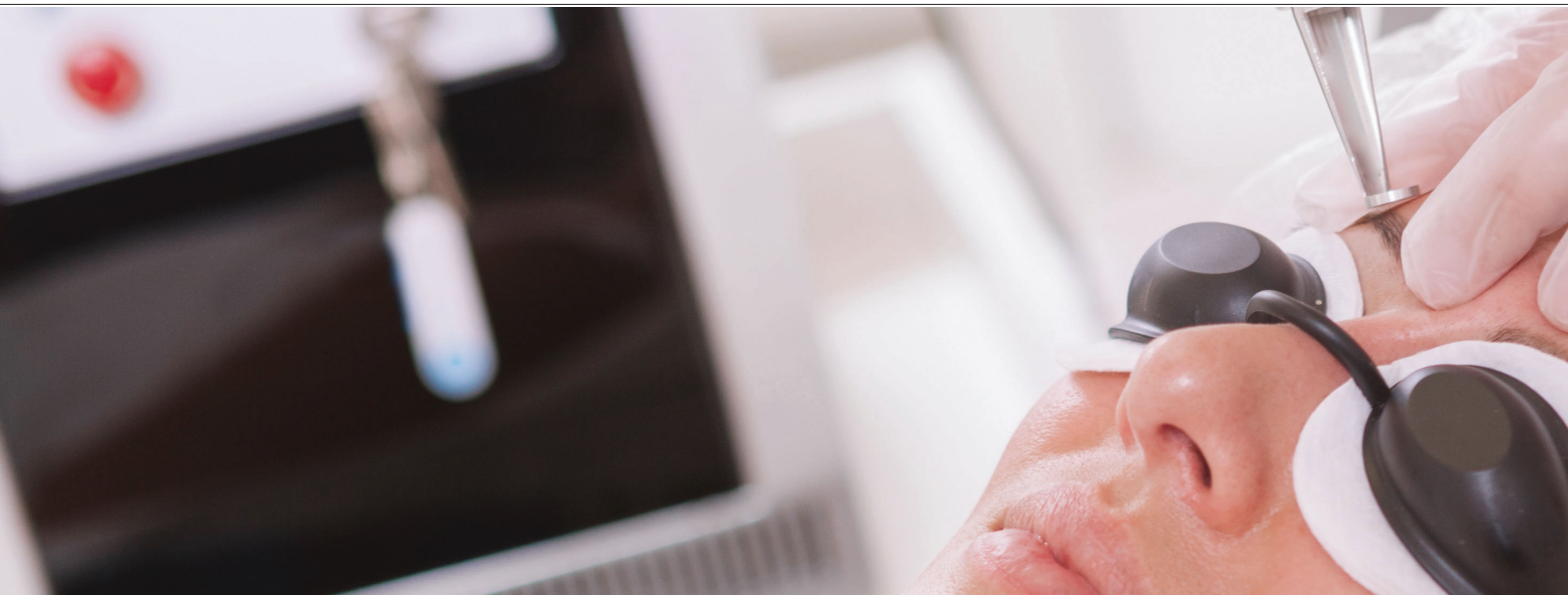
It seems like every day, a new device debuts, promising the erasure of visible signs of aging, near-science fiction anti-gravity innovations when it comes to sagging and sculpted features like we're fine clay between a potter's fingers.

This also means that in terms of aesthetics, we're at a unique cross-section. You have a market flooded with products, devices and solutions, and a consumer base that's more aware of aesthetic practices than ever before. Surely, this means that beauty is becoming more attainable, more accessible, than ever before, with a route to desirable results for every price point, skin type and style?

Maybe to some extent; we're certainly witnessing a sort of second-wave globalization when it comes to beauty, after all. Aesthetics is more inclusive than it used to be; there are skin care brands for every budget, and the same goes for services. Weight loss drugs like GLP-1s aren't reserved for just the wealthiest of us either. Skin and body types traditionally locked out by the foundation of Western beauty standards have been allowed to let their individualistic communities flourish, cracking open what were once seen as opaque, niche monoliths to glean new facets of multicultural beauty to the mainstream.

However.

Beauty has always been leveraged as a status symbol, and in a dizzying cycle, we tumble. Things coveted by the upper echelons of society emerge as what's au courant, leaving the rest of us to eke out a path to replicable results. As a trend becomes super mainstream and falls into younger, less discerning hands, tastemakers look for the bottle where lightning will strike next.



The convergence of luxury beauty and wellness is defined by the rist of holsitic health tools, skin barrier health and a focus on internal well-being.

## Where does luxury beauty leave wellness?

The merging of beauty and wellness complicates this dynamic further, as it's troubling to think of beauty (and the esteem that society attaches to it) as being paywalled, but putting a price on wellness and longevity—well, that's a rather more concerning sentiment.

So, if beauty, skin and wellness are merging and expanding horizontally with more of, well, everything, what differentiates luxe wellness from its more attainable cousin?

"For seasoned estheticians, the industry's growing emphasis on devices reflects both technological advancement and rising client expectations driven by a more informed wellness culture," says Kristyn Smith, esthetician and founder of Practise NYC. "Today's luxury client is increasingly aware of tools and modalities, but is seeking thoughtful integration—wanting technology to support long-term skin health rather than replace hands-on expertise. This heightened awareness has refined demand overall, with clients expecting personalization, discretion and a clear understanding of how wellness, lifestyle and skin intersect. When treating specific conditions such as hormonal acne in a luxury setting, the approach often differs from other environments by prioritizing education, consistency and restraint over aggressive intervention, ensuring the experience feels corrective, intentional and deeply considered."



Brand T. Beal, MD, Fellow of the American Academy of Dermatology, adds that trust plays a factor as well. He says, "Luxury starts when the visit feels like 'this was built for me,' not 'pick Botox A or B.' Rather, a thoughtful roadmap: skin goals, timeline, maintenance and realistic expectations."

This makes sense; if one of the most valuable things we can purchase is convenience, then luxury in aesthetics means taking the heavy lifting out of clients' hands without sacrificing customization. Curated to be results-oriented, those in the luxury wellness market have the advantage of being able to afford not only the latest treatments and specialized treatments, but *more* treatments in general, meaning more consistency. With more frequent visits to their esthetician, that means restraint comes at what feels like less of a cost. It doesn't feel like missing out, but letting the skin rest when you know your next consultation is just around the corner.

It's this level of precision that Beal says is characteristic of luxury services. "Same concerns don't equal the same protocol," he notes. "Luxury care means tailoring products, procedures and pacing to the patient's anatomy, lifestyle, tolerance, budget and risk profile."

Beal adds: "[Luxury means] A calm, unrushed experience. Luxury is time to ask questions, understand options and leave feeling confident, not pressured." The final tell for someone being in the luxury market? Results that age well. According to Beal, the most premium outcome is the one that looks amazing now and continues to look amazing five years from now.

*Image by thor at Adobe Stock and elelnavolf at Adobe Stock*



While we've moved away from many unhealthy beauty trends, social media has pressed consumers under a more intensive magnifying glass, contributing to the heightened focus of detailed, natural-looking beauty.

## Is filler the next "heroin" chic?

Not quite. While beauty standards, especially in the luxury space, will always be somewhat defined by their air of unattainability, culturally, we're all ready to put down dangerous trends. When longevity is the holy grail in both aesthetics and wellness, there simply isn't any more room to choose ultra-thinness over a healthy, fit glow, or dried-out, overly processed skin and hair, compared to working with your body's natural chemistry.

Instead, "class" will be defined by how effortless beauty looks. Regenerative medicine is huge because it works with the body's natural chemistry to not hide the visual signs of aging, but to slow and even reverse them. Filler only blew up in the mainstream once the industry figured out how to better create seamless, natural-looking results.

According to Beal, skin as a modern status symbol means glow, texture and healthy skin architecture—not obvious work.

He goes on to elaborate on the division we see even within the medspa space, which those less discerning or experienced may not know how to differentiate: "The market has split into two lanes. Convenience and discount-driven experiences on one end, and premium outcomes and premium services on the other. Many patients'graduate' to luxury after too many rushed or cookie-cutter treatments that are not getting them the results they are looking for. When consumers have 10 places offering 'the same' injectable, they start asking either: One, who is the cheapest, or two, who's the most skilled? Who's safest? Who will make me look like me? Who can deliver the outcome I am looking for? Medspas that are competing on price need volume. Doctors who are competing on quality do not have to sell more filler; they can focus on the natural outcome the patient desires."

When care can and is being personalized across different goals and different comfort levels in terms of invasiveness and modalities, medspas aren't replacing much of anything, but filling out an already sprawling landscape. Stephanie Weeden, an esthetician of 15 years at Tricoci Oak Brook, says, "Medspas have elevated the skin care industry, especially for clients needing corrective treatments like resurfacing. If you think about it as a full ecosystem, my experience is in treating, maintaining and supporting the skin before and after medspa treatments. When a client needs more than I can safely offer, I actually see that as a good thing, because moving from a spa service to a medspa treatment can lead to better outcomes and healthier skin long-term."

Most industry professionals are in agreement that this new age of diversified procedures and treatments requires everyone to respect the limits of who can do what, which can serve as the foundation for stronger, more meaningful professional connections rather than divvy up an industry at times polarized by different flavors of approaches. "Safety is the ultimate flex," states Beal. "High-end care is conservative where it should be: right candidates, right doses, right intervals, meticulous technique and a strong emphasis on natural results over trends.

Dana Racana, an esthetician of 29 years at Tricoci Deerfield, adds: "Staying sharp in today's market requires a mindset of integrative esthetics. Rather than viewing medspas as competition, I view them as a partner in a client's long-term skin health. At Tricoci, we've leaned into this concept by recently launching our pilot medspa at our Oakbrook location, which is allowing us to bridge the gap between clinical results and the high-end spa experience we are known for. As an educator, I stay relevant by prioritizing continuing education within our team

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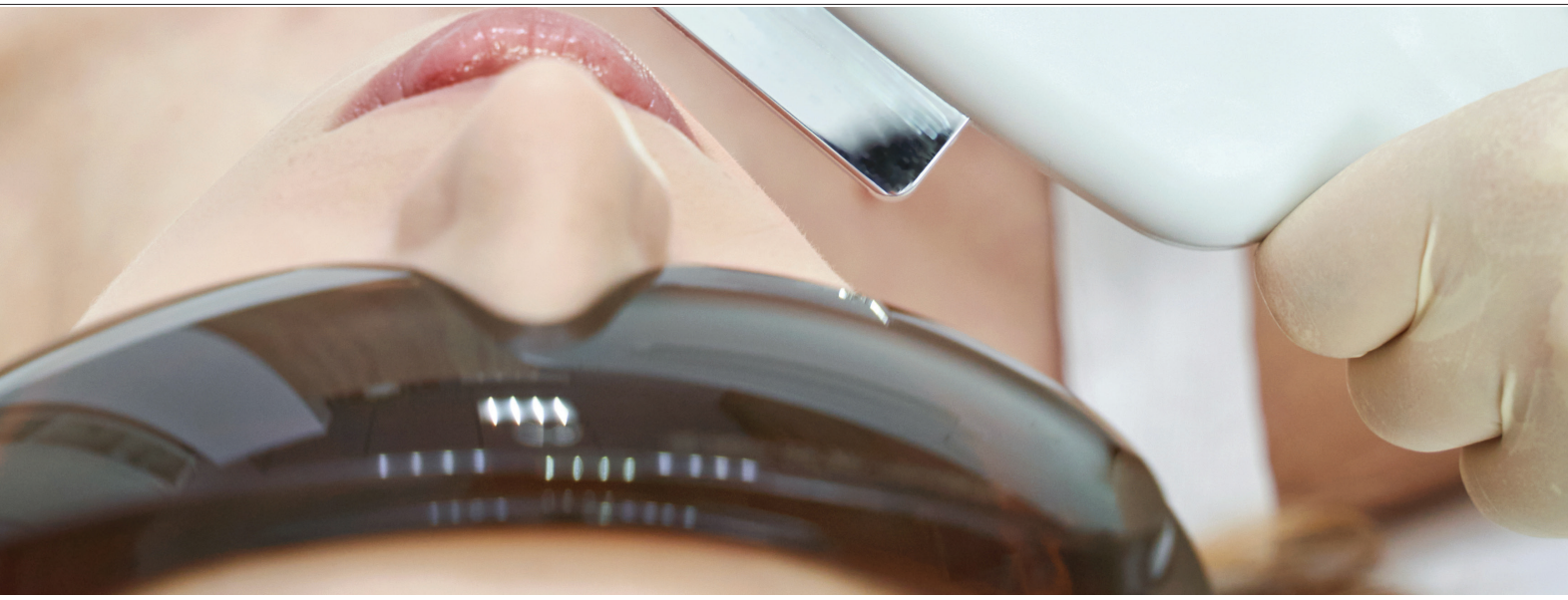

**Existing in both the beauty and wellness space redeems some of the pressure within the former's, shifting the focus to being well and feeling good, rather than just appearing so.**

of over one hundred estheticians. The exciting growth of our medspa within our department now lets me analyze and teach the importance of medical-grade treatments and how we can support them by focusing on pre-and post-treatments by our licensed estheticians."

"It's important to remember that skin care and wellness are about both daily habits *and* specialty services," Weeden continues. "I encourage my clients to think above and beyond products and devices and focus on their overall health from the inside out. For example, what are they eating? Are they stressed all the time? Are they living in a positive environment? Providing that perspective and guidance is crucial."



While many of us tend to think of medical spaces as more utilitarian than luxurious (if not a little anxiety-inducing), medspas are forging a new identity that allows the two spaces to overlap. The role of those with medical expertise in aesthetic spaces can define their brand of luxury by something he calls "white glove follow-through." "Great pre-care instructions, thoughtful post-care check-ins and easy access when patients have questions or issues," Beal lists. "Luxury is 'we've got you' from start to finish."

Racana emphasizes the importance of staff education, not just around the different modalities, but on the various roles of professionals in the industry. She says, "In a'gadget-heavy-industry', it's easy to get hung up on the 'bells and whistles.' I teach our new hires that technology is a tool, not a replacement for personal touch. Our hands really are the best tool in our business! While it's imperative that we understand the physics behind devices like LED, microcurrent and ultrasonic (to name a few), we must navigate through this by never losing our power of human connection. Our roles as estheticians have quickly evolved from 'service providers' to 'skin health coaches.' We educate our clients on how lifestyle impacts their skin, how home regimens matter, and we are the bridge between their clinical fixes and a sustainable, holistic skin care plan."

Understanding the nuances between various roles in clients' broader wellness journey is precisely why Weeden and Racana feel confident in curating services and treatments where they work. For Weeden, Tricoci's wide array of options gives her the flexibility to work freely in pursuit of what best suits each client:

*Images by elenavolf at Adobe Stock*



Staying up-to-date doesn't mean getting every new gadget - curation will go far in keeping demand high, and your brand's identity, solid.

"Because there are so many skin care [solutions] available under the Tricoci umbrella—both in the spa and medspa spaces—I can guide my clients toward custom, smart skin care investments that fit their needs and budgets."

Racana aligns with this approach as well, connecting it back to the values so foundational to Tricoci as a brand. She says, "Curation at Tricoci is a balance of integrity and innovation. We don't chase every'viral' treatment; instead, we curate based on the pillars of efficacy, safety and the Tricoci Experience. When we launched the Tricoci Aesthetics MedSpa in Oakbrook, we looked for services that complemented our existing spa rituals rather than replacing them. We select treatments that offer synergistic results, for example, pairing a medical microneedling with a restorative, calming LED facial. We also rely heavily on data and feedback from our providers. Because I work with our new hire program, I'm able to see which techniques deliver consistent results across different skin types, ensuring our menu is inclusive, effective and sophisticated."

"Luxury skin care is where medicine meets hospitality," Beal concludes. "High standards, thoughtful communication, meticulous technique and a patient experience that feels calm, personalized and genuinely cared for."

I don't know about you, but that sounds like a worthwhile investment for any well-seeker.

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**Kitty Lin** is the managing editor of *Skin Inc.*



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*Image provided by Melati Citrawireja*


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# Considerations in Private Label: AN INTERVIEW WITH TAMI BLAKE

By Kitty Lin

**Life's a journey, and sometimes, the detours we take along the way to our calling, end up being the tools that help us when we find our place in the world.**

**For Tami Blake, a licensed esthetician, spa owner and award-winning beauty entrepreneur behind two brands: Free + True and Sweet & True, this meant transitioning from a career in banking and finance, before pursuing aesthetic school and discovering her affinity for skin care, and eventually, product formulation.**




In 2013, she opened her own spa, only to discover that many of the waxing products available contained mineral oil or talcum powder, both of which are known carcinogens. Drawing on her background in formulation and herbalism, she strived to create something safe for her team and clients. Then, a trip to the Middle East introduced her to sugaring, and better yet, a basic sugaring paste can be easily and simply made with just sugar, water and lemon.

Her sugaring recipe is actually a family one that she ended up scaling up to be available for professionals—a mighty big leap. Blake describes the process as an educational one. “There’s a lot of research and tweaking when going from the stove to a larger tank, and you know, the mass market. It just took a lot of trial and error. There’s learning manufacturing practices and procuring a space, and learning to do it [create product] in a safe and sanitary way. That was the first thing on my mind when I decided to do this: let’s get the space, and let’s do it right.”




Images provided by Melati Citrawireja

## Walking the line between professional and consumer markets

Blake's products started as a professional brand before she launched another line that was direct to consumer. She notes that many brands that have both professional and consumer lines tend to start at the mass market before creating a more specialized line for pros. "Those are two completely different markets," she comments. "It takes a lot of resources and capital to execute because they're two different animals."

As far as the products themselves, backbar products tend to be more potent with their actives, which makes sense; estheticians are specifically trained to work with skin safely. Consumer-focused products don't pack the same punch, so there's less of a chance someone will damage their skin at home. These products are meant to sustain skin health and results in between treatments, rather than replace them entirely: a fact that's important for clients to understand as brands with dual lines are becoming more and more popular.

With a flooded market, there's also the added weight marketing materials now shoulder, and not always gracefully. As consumers make their demands known, marketing materials strive to distinguish their brands and present them as the perfect match for consumers. Since there's no regulation on what brands can call themselves natural or clean, market-fatigued buyers are susceptible to making the mistake of purchasing products that might not align with their priorities after all.

For Blake, she prioritizes being transparent about what goes into her products, so that consumers and professionals can both be empowered to decide how good a fit it is for themselves. Her own standards for clean products are reflected in her approach to formulation: staying away from petroleum-derived products, for one, and avoiding known carcinogens like talcum powder, for another.



*Image provided by Melati Citrawireja*

Top: The start of the "True" lines' journeys was Blake's endeavor towards safer products.

Left: Free + True Skincare

Right: Integrity and safety are paramount for Blake, who prioritized good manufacturing practices and a sanitary space in which to manufacture, from the very beginning.




Top: Free + True Great Awakening Peptide Eye Cream

Bottom: Sweet & True "The Daily Mantra" Antioxidant Body Serum

Right: Blake's business offers estheticians private label services for sugaring paste, using its in-house expertise and chemists.




Photo provided by Melani Cirdwire

## Navigating what's on the horizon of the private label aesthetic market

The market is so diversified these days that preferences have expanded past avoiding certain ingredients, and with the wide array of skin needs and consumer values, it can be tricky for brands to decide who their best fit is, audience-wise. Blake's approach was to go the opposite way, though; in an age where everyone's tastes are so specific, why not create a universal product to be a staple, safe to be enjoyed and beloved by everyone?

When it comes to the personalized market, Blake notes that often, the way to approach customization is to start with a gentle base and swap out products according to preference and/or condition. Her brands are navigating the age of hyper-customization by hosting products gentle enough to be amenable with sensitive skin types, post-procedure skin and skin with conditions like rosacea. She also makes a point to keep them fragrance-free. In terms of what she advises for others starting their own product lines, she says there's no universal right answer. "It depends on your business model and bandwidth."

Intention and integrity are what Blake's *modus operandi* comes down to, and it's a reliable guide for others to navigate private label, as well. When it comes to partnering with manufacturers and formulators, it's important you do your due diligence and really know who you're working with.

"You want to ensure they're reliable partners, and that they're doing things on time, and that they're operating with the same level of integrity you are. People might try to cut corners — you just don't know where they've sourced that chamomile, for example."

This has implications for the custom device manufacturing industry as well, with similar considerations being present.

Whatever you're trying to create custom, Blake reaffirms the importance of credible professionals. "It's important to bring in expertise, and make sure it's a credible source, and that everything's been tested." She's optimistic about the personalized device market, as professionals become more comfortable with private label, and it becomes easier to navigate with the myriad of services at the industry's disposal.

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**Kitty Lin** is the managing editor of *Skin Inc.*



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# LIVING BEAUTIFULLY THROUGH ADVERSITY

By Jessica Johnson

I was sitting at my desk in my office when I found out I had cancer, just moments after finishing with clients. The room still carried the familiar calm of the workday—the hum of routine, the tools I had just set down, the small comforts I'd carefully curated over the years. Sunlight filtered through the window, and framed photos of my family and moments from my career sat quietly on my desk, suddenly feeling strange, almost like they belonged to someone else.

Two days earlier, I had undergone a biopsy. A week before that, an ultrasound. Both doctors had gently told me it looked like cancer, but that only test results could confirm it. I was still in denial. I didn't have a family history. I took good care of myself. There was no way this could be real—it had to be benign.

When the nurse called, her voice was kind and steady. She confirmed it was cancer, reassured me it was very small, caught early and highly treatable. I registered her words intellectually, but emotionally, I went numb. Then, without warning, the tears came—uncontrollable, overwhelming. That was the moment the unknown truly began, and it was one of the hardest parts to face.

Cancer doesn't arrive gently. It doesn't ask if you're ready. It shows up and redraws your life without permission. From that moment on, there was life before cancer, and life after it, and nothing felt the same again.

From that moment on, there was life before cancer, and life after it, and nothing felt the same again.

For more than fifteen years, I've built a career in the beauty industry helping others feel safe, seen and cared for. As estheticians, we're trained to be steady, to hold space, to be the calm presence people seek when the world feels overwhelming. I had spent years creating not just results, but refuge.

Yet in that moment, I couldn't find my breath. My heart raced and my hands trembled. I remember sitting there, trying to reconcile how my body—the same body I trusted to work, to serve, to show up day after day—suddenly felt unfamiliar and fragile.

Fear didn't slowly creep in; it arrived all at once, followed by anger, disbelief and grief—not only for what might happen, but for the version of myself who had no idea how profoundly her life was about to change.

I didn't feel brave in that moment. I didn't feel strong or inspirational. I felt human, stripped of certainty and forced to face the reality that I was now the one who needed care.

I rushed to the bathroom to compose myself before my next client arrived. On the way, I ran into my landlord. He stopped short when he saw my face—the tears, the shock, the rawness in my eyes. I didn't say anything. I pushed past him, knowing I couldn't talk. I still had clients to see. So I wiped my tears, took a breath, and did what I had always done: I put on a brave face and kept working.

Surgery and treatment came quickly. I was assigned a full medical team—oncologist, oncology surgeon, radiation oncologist, nurses and a social worker—all in one day. Hours of appointments blurred together. I listened, but so much went in one ear and out the other as my mind raced with questions I couldn't silence: How is this possible? What did I do wrong? How did this happen?

They reassured me I had done nothing wrong, that this was the most favorable diagnosis possible, that treatment would be straightforward. I felt grateful—deeply grateful, but cancer is still cancer. No version of it feels like good news.

I wasn't only recovering from surgery; I was grieving the illusion that life is predictable, that strength means pushing through, that tomorrow is promised simply because today exists. Cancer has a way of humbling you quickly, but it also has a way of clarifying what actually matters.

Three days after completing a major move from my longtime home into town—a move that had been planned and set in stone—I underwent surgery. There was no postponing either. My reality became stark and compressed: move my life, then six days later, have surgery to remove cancer. Doctors told me I would likely need only one surgery if there were no complications, followed by radiation, and that I would need six to eight weeks before returning to work.

I had never been away from clients that long. The fear of what this would mean for my business, my income and my identity weighed heavily as I grieved the life I had known before cancer.

Healing slowed my life down in ways I had never allowed before. My calendar emptied, my body demanded rest, and the constant motion that had once defined my days came to a halt. In that quiet, I had no choice but to sit with myself—without productivity, without achievement, without the armor of being busy.

It was uncomfortable and lonely, but it was also deeply honest.

I began to see where I had pushed too hard, ignored my body's signals, and equated worth with output. I realized how often I had shown up fully for everyone else while quietly abandoning myself in the process. Cancer didn't just interrupt my life; it exposed the places where something needed to change.

That version of myself is something I had to mourn. What became clear to me during that time is something our industry doesn't talk about nearly enough. We teach technique, professionalism, results, and outcomes, but we rarely discuss what happens when your personal life is unraveling and you're still expected to show up, how to navigate illness without guilt, how to rest without shame, or how to set boundaries when your income depends on your availability.

I used to believe strength meant never slowing down. Now I understand that strength often looks like listening, pausing, asking for help, and choosing yourself without apology.

When I eventually returned to work, it was slow, and intentionally so. About four weeks after surgery, I taught a class that had been booked long before my diagnosis. I didn't want to cancel, but I quickly realized I was doing the same thing again: forcing myself before I was ready. The anxiety, stress, and panic returned, reminding me that healing doesn't respond well to pressure.

I backed off again. I saw a few clients here and there. I postponed classes. I made choices that protected my body, even when it meant financial strain. In the silence of not constantly being busy, I finally understood how deeply I had been serving everyone but myself.

Cancer taught me lessons I never wanted but deeply needed. It taught me that rest is not weakness, vulnerability does not erase professionalism, boundaries protect longevity, and community is essential. Most importantly, it taught me that pain does not cancel purpose—it refines it.







I stopped trying to return to who I was before cancer and started becoming who I was meant to be next.

"Living Beautifully" has always been the name of my business, but cancer gave it a deeper meaning. Today, living beautifully means living awake instead of on autopilot, living honestly instead of performatively, and living through hard chapters instead of around them. Beauty is no longer just something I create for others; it's something I choose for myself in how I heal, how I lead, and how I show up.

This journey has also found its way onto the page. As I moved through diagnosis, treatment, and recovery, I began writing—not with the intention of publishing, but as a way to process the fear, make sense of the loss, and hold onto the clarity this season brought. Over time, those pages became something more.

What began as personal reflection has grown into a book I'm currently finishing—one rooted in resilience, healing, and what it truly means to live beautifully when life doesn't go according to plan. It isn't a story about cancer alone, but about identity, purpose, and learning how to remain human and hopeful in the hardest chapters. Writing it has been another form of healing, and another way to reach back and steady someone else who may be walking a similar path.

I'm sharing this story for the same reason. Because I know I'm not the only one. Somewhere, someone reading this is exhausted from being strong, hiding fear behind professionalism, or pushing through when their body is begging them to pause. If that's you, know this: you don't have to choose between healing and purpose. You are allowed to rest and still be powerful, to fall apart and still rebuild, to survive this and grow because of it.

Cancer didn't take my life. It gave me clarity.

I am still healing, still learning, still becoming, but I know this with certainty: there is purpose in this pain, strength in this struggle, and a meaningful, beautiful life on the other side of fear.

Cancer changed everything, but it did not define me.

I am moving forward not as who I was before, but as someone stronger, clearer, and more grounded than ever—committed to living, leading, and loving with intention, honesty, and hope.



**Jessica Johnson** is a nationally recognized esthetic authority, multi-award-winning licensed esthetician, permanent makeup artist and master educator, as well as the founder of Living Beautifully Spa & Aesthetic Academy in Omaha, Nebraska. With over 15 years of experience, she serves as an international judge for The Skin Games. She is widely respected for her expertise in advanced skin treatments, regenerative technologies and esthetic business development. She also holds a national leadership role with BioSkin Aesthetics, supporting practitioners in the integration of advanced clinical modalities, including BioRePeel and the BioTouch Precision Microneedling System. Her work is defined by resilience, innovation and a commitment to elevating the next generation of esthetic professionals.

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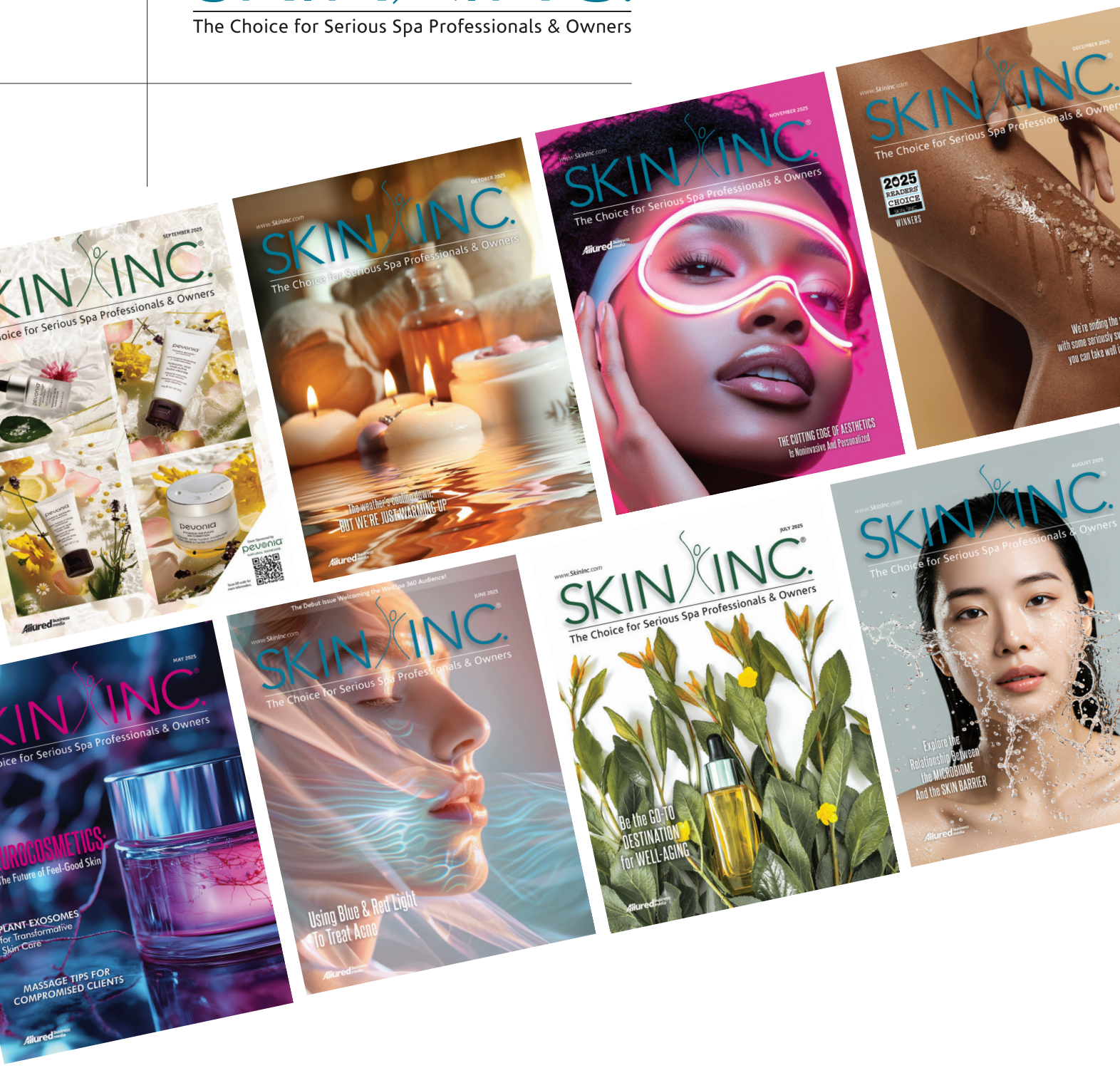


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