

BEAUTY GAZETTE

Ask Val

You've got questions? Our beauty director, VALERIE MONROE, has answers.

Q I'm only 23, but I have stretch marks. How can I get rid of them?

Twenty-three, eh? From where I sit, it seems like you were practically just born. But that doesn't mean you can't have stretch marks—a kind of scar caused by a genetic predisposition to the breakdown of collagen and elastin, says Harold Lancer, MD, a Beverly Hills-based dermatologist. You might start with a topical retinoid cream, which helps the body replace damaged tissue by increasing collagen production. Laser treatments also reduce stretch marks; if you have dark skin, however, you must be *very* careful with lasers, because they can cause scarring. Lancer, who developed the Lancer Ethnicity Scale to help patients find the right laser treatment for their skin type and calculate healing times, recommends the Pixel laser for darker skin.

Bottom line: A topical retinoid cream used nightly for one month, combined



with a Pixel laser treatment once a month for six months, will diminish stretch marks.

Q How long do I need to use a product to assess its effectiveness?

I've often wondered the same thing. I've used a retinoid cream on my face every night for a few years, and I *think* it has improved the texture of my skin, but how do I know what I'd look like if I hadn't used it

or had used something else? This is the kind of existential question that racks a beauty editor's soul.

It can take several months of use before retinoids (like Tazorac, Retin-A, and Differin) stimulate enough collagen to have a noticeable effect, says David McDaniel, MD, assistant professor of clinical dermatology at Eastern Virginia Medical School. With antioxidants like green tea, CoffeeBerry, and coenzyme Q-10, you might notice a brightening effect in weeks, but it could be

months before you see a reduction in fine lines. A lightening agent (for dark spots) like hydroquinone, mulberry, licorice, or kojic acid can begin to work in days, but it usually takes weeks to see an appreciable reduction in pigment. If you see no difference in three or four weeks, it's probably not going to work. The same is true for acne products; after about a month with no improvement, see a dermatologist.

Bottom line: Be patient. If after a month or two (or four, for retinoids) you see no difference in your skin, move on.

Q I'm getting dark patches on my face from the Pill. What can I do to prevent or minimize them?

It sounds as if you've got melasma, a common condition characterized by dark, hyperpigmented patches on the cheeks, forehead, or upper lip, says Elizabeth Hale, MD, clinical assistant professor of dermatology at the New York University School of

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VAL ASKS YOU: Whenever anyone asks me if I'd consider having work done on my face, I always say no, that I'm waiting for pop-off heads. Is there a beauty innovation you wish someone would come up with to solve a particular problem or to make your life easier? Kate Sandoval, our contributing associate beauty editor, wished for a booth at the beach where you could get sprayed with sunscreen—that kind of thing. Be imaginative! To respond, go to oprah.com/omagazine_talk.