

The Buffer Method

How to soften a retinal so your skin can build tolerance — without giving up the results.

The number-one reason people quit retinal is they go in too strong, too soon. Buffering lets you keep using it while your skin catches up — and the cushion comes from the moisturiser, not from anything watery.

FIRST, THE SPECTRUM

From bare skin to fully cushioned

How a retinal lands depends entirely on what's underneath it. Bare skin is the most direct — and the most likely to bite. Each layer you add slows it down. You work *from* cushioned *toward* bare as your skin earns it.

Bare skin

Retinal straight onto clean, dry skin — the deepest, most direct delivery. Most effective, most likely to irritate. The version you earn.

The buffer

A thin layer of moisturiser *under* the retinal. One cushioning layer — softens how strongly it lands.

The sandwich

Moisturiser before *and* after. Two layers — the most cushioned, for the most sensitive nights.

← DEEPEST, MOST DIRECT

GENTLEST →

THE TWO WAYS TO BUFFER

The Buffer

The Sandwich

MOISTURISER FIRST · GENTLER

- 1 **Moisturiser**
thin layer, on clean dry skin
- 2 **Retinal**
over the moisturiser

Best for brand-new or sensitive skin.

MOISTURISER BOTH SIDES · MOST CUSHIONED

- 1 **Moisturiser**
thin layer first
- 2 **Retinal**
the filling
- 3 **Moisturiser**
seal over the top

Two layers cushion more — a good rescue on a fragile night.

What to buffer with: reach for your night ceramide barrier cream — ceramides with cholesterol and fatty acids, ideally a physiological ~3:1:1 ratio — so the layer cushioning the retinal is repairing your barrier at the same time. Its richer texture is also what does the slowing; a thin gel-cream won't cushion the same way.

THE BIT THAT SURPRISES PEOPLE

Why the moisturiser — not a toner

It feels intuitive that a hydrating toner under your retinal would "soften" it. It does the opposite. The moisturiser is the real cushion: its richer, oilier texture is a layer the retinal has to diffuse through, which genuinely slows how fast and how hard it lands. A watery toner can't do that — and worse, hydration actually helps an active penetrate. That's the very reason retinoids go on dry, not damp, skin.

So the toner is hydration, not a buffer

This is why, in *The Routine Bible*, your Beginner retinoid nights stay toner-free and lean on a moisturiser buffer instead. The hydrating toner only joins your nights later, at *Intermediate* — once you've weaned the buffer off — and it's there for comfort and hydration, not cushioning. If anything, it nudges the retinal in a touch faster, which is exactly why you add it only once your skin can take the retinal bare.

WHY IT'S NOT "CHEATING"

Same active, a pace your barrier can handle

The retinal still reaches your skin through the cream; the moisturiser just slows how fast it gets there, so you get the smoothing and renewal with far less of the sting, flaking and redness. You're not getting a weaker result — you're getting the same active at a pace your barrier can handle. As your skin acclimatises you simply use less buffer, then drop it altogether. Buffering is a bridge, not a permanent crutch.

GETTING IT RIGHT

Retinal goes onto dry, not damp, skin

Bare, buffered, or — later — over a hydrating toner you've let dry: whatever's underneath, it should be dry, never wet. Damp skin drives the retinal in faster and harder, the opposite of what you want while building tolerance.

Bare skin is the deepest route — once you've earned it

Like vitamin C and acids, retinal can go straight onto bone-dry skin after cleansing for the most direct effect. That's the goal you build toward — not where a beginner starts.

If it still stings through the buffer, add the sandwich

Two layers cushion more. Buffer below and seal above, give it a few comfortable weeks, then thin things out again. If the retinal still bites, that's your cue to go slower, not push on.

Wean off slowly — at Intermediate, one night at a time

Drop the buffer on one retinoid night, then the other a week later, then both. The moisturiser still seals at the end every night. If a stronger strength stings later, reach for the buffer again — it's a tool, not a step backward.

Still too much, even buffered? Reach for bakuchiol

If a low-strength retinal with a buffer *still* leaves you stinging, flaking or pink past the next morning, you can swap the retinal for bakuchiol — a gentler, non-retinoid alternative that gives retinal-like results without the bite. More on it just below.

A tingle is normal; a burn isn't

If the sandwich still stings or your skin stays red the next morning, drop a retinal night, go gentler, and give your barrier time. Slower always wins.

THE GENTLE ALTERNATIVE

When retinal still isn't for you — bakuchiol

Some skin simply won't settle on a retinal, even low and buffered — and that's not a failure, it's just your skin. Bakuchiol is the gentler route. It's a plant-derived ingredient (from the babchi seed) that isn't a retinoid at all, yet works along similar pathways in the skin — so it delivers retinal-like smoothing, firmness and a more even tone, with far less of the stinging and flaking. It's well tolerated where retinoids aren't, and because it isn't photosensitising you can use it morning or night.

Use it in place of the retinal on your retinoid nights, and build it the same careful way — start low, a couple of nights a week, and rise slowly. You can always trial a low retinal again down the track, once your barrier is stronger.

One honest note

Gentler doesn't mean a free pass in pregnancy or breastfeeding — bakuchiol's safety there isn't established, so it's not a proven swap for that situation. The same rule holds as for any active: check with your doctor.

The Glow Educator · Skin School

A companion to The Routine Bible. This isn't personal medical advice — patch test, go slow, and adapt to your own skin.