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## K-beauty is fuelling your child's 'cosmeticorexia'; what parents need to know

Forget the 'cosmeticorexia' noise of trending products and influencer hauls. A dermatologist reveals the skincare routine tweens and teens really need.

By RITU GUPTA

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Pre-teens are becoming obsessed with skincare. Here's what a dermatologist wants you to know. Picture: iStock

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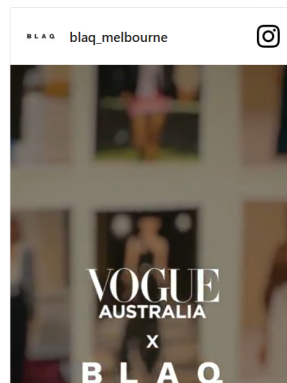
The waiting room of a dermatologist's office used to be the domain of adults. Teenagers came occasionally, usually for acne. But increasingly, I'm seeing something that troubles me far more than a breakout: pre-teens – some as young as 10 – arriving with elaborate skincare arsenals, detailed product knowledge, and a level of anxiety about their complexions that simply has no place at that age.

We have a name for this now. Cosmeticorexia – an obsessive preoccupation with skincare and cosmetic products – is emerging as a genuine issue in the pediatric population. And while the term may be new, the forces driving it are very familiar: social media, savvy marketing, and the enduring human desire, weaponised in the young and vulnerable, to belong.

As a dermatologist, I want to give parents something they can actually use. Because the science here is not complicated, even if the social dynamics are.

### What the skincare industry doesn't want you to

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## know about your child's skin

Here is a clinical truth that gets lost entirely in the noise of trending products and influencer hauls: children do not have ageing skin. They do not need [anti-ageing ingredients](#). Retinols, peptides, salicylic acid – these are formulated for mature skin with mature skin concerns. Applying them to a 10-year-old's face is not proactive skincare. It is, at best, a waste of money. At worst, it is causing harm.



Pre-teens do not need elaborate skincare arsenals, nor to carry a level of anxiety about their complexions that simply have no place at that age. Picture: iStock

I see it in my practice regularly. [Pre-teens presenting with allergic contact dermatitis](#) – angry, inflamed rashes across the face – triggered by active ingredients their young, sensitive skin simply cannot tolerate. What begins as an inappropriate product choice can escalate quickly: the skin barrier breaks down, bacteria colonise the compromised surface, and suddenly a child who started with clear skin has an infected rash that requires medical treatment. The irony is painful. They began with the goal of better skin and ended up in a dermatologist's office.

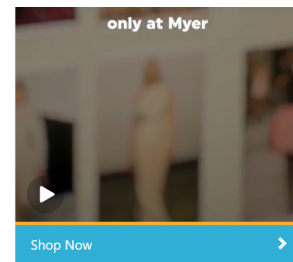
A dominant force behind [the current obsession is K-beauty](#) – shorthand for Korean beauty – a philosophy and product category originating in South Korea that prioritises achieving “glass skin”: a luminous, poreless, impossibly dewy complexion that has become the aspirational ideal across social media. K-beauty routines are famous for their multi-step regimens and novel ingredients, and the [products that go viral regularly include things such as snail mucin](#), bee venom, salmon extract and starfish powder. Let me be direct: the glass skin these products promise does not exist outside a filtered photograph. Real skin has pores. Real skin has texture. Real adolescent skin, navigating the hormonal upheaval of puberty, has acne. The claims attached to many of these exotic ingredients are based on in vitro studies – meaning experiments in a petri dish, not in humans. They are expensive, largely unstudied, and entirely unsuitable for children.



Real adolescent skin has acne. Picture: iStock

Equally concerning is the trend of using skin-lightening products among children with skin of colour, particularly those from South Asian, Middle Eastern and East Asian backgrounds. The pressure to achieve a paler complexion is deeply embedded in certain cultural contexts, and the cosmetics industry is more than willing to profit from that insecurity. Selling bleaching agents and brightening serums to children is not just medically inappropriate – it sends a message about what constitutes beauty that can do lasting psychological damage.

## When marketing grooms a consumer before they can vote



I want to talk about what is actually happening here, because calling it a “trend” understates the deliberate commercial intent. Skincare brands have identified children as a growth market, and they are pursuing them with considerable sophistication. Products arrive in bright packaging with playful names. Some are explicitly co-branded with Disney and Pixar properties. The shelf placement and the social media algorithm do the rest.

Children, and particularly pre-teens, do not have the cognitive development to critically evaluate marketing claims. They cannot distinguish between a testimonial and evidence. They cannot parse the difference between an in vitro study and a randomised controlled trial. What they can do is feel the acute social pressure of exclusion – and brands understand this perfectly. I hear it from parents constantly: “If I don’t get it for her, everyone else will have it and she’ll be left out.” That is not a child making a skincare decision. That is a child being exploited, and a parent being held to ransom.

The financial drain is real. Skincare products marketed to teens are not cheap, and a 12-product routine – which I have seen, more than once – represents a significant ongoing cost. But the time drain may be equally serious. A lengthy morning and evening skincare ritual takes time that teenagers should be spending on sleep, study, exercise or simply being young. We are handing children an anxiety-laden ritual and calling it self-care.

## What your child actually needs – and what to do about it

The good news for parents is that the dermatological answer is straightforward, even if the conversation with your child is not.

Children need three things from their skincare routine: a gentle cleanser, a moisturiser and sunscreen. That is it. [Sunscreen is genuinely important](#) – instilling the habit of daily SPF application, even on cloudy days, is one of the most meaningful things a parent can do for their child’s long-term skin health. Everything else is optional at best and harmful at worst.



Children only need a gentle cleanser, a moisturiser and sunscreen. That’s it. Picture: iStock

When I see a young patient with an overloaded routine, my first question is always: What are you actually trying to achieve? It is a question worth parents asking too. Underneath the product collecting is often a real concern – acne, uneven skin tone, feeling self-conscious – and those concerns deserve a real answer, not a shopping list.

My clinical advice to parents is this: Do not be afraid to say no, and do not fight that battle alone. If your child won’t hear it from you, take them to a GP or dermatologist. A professional opinion often lands differently, and the cost of a single consultation is almost certainly less than a month of unnecessary products.

The skincare industry will not regulate itself. Algorithms will not stop surfacing aspirational content to 13-year-olds. That leaves parents, and it leaves clinicians like me, to hold the line.

Your child’s skin is fine. What it needs is sunscreen – not a serum, not a glass-skin filter, and certainly not the approval of a wellness influencer.

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