

Health Conditions > [Skin Health](#)

Chapped Lips

Because balm alone may not cut it.

By [Melanie Rud](#)

Medically reviewed by [Michele S. Green, MD](#)

September 28, 2023





Zenzeta/Adobe Stock

It's easy to leave your lips out of your **skin care routine**. Sure, maybe you haphazardly swipe on the balm that lives at the bottom of your work bag or nightstand drawer, but aside from that, unless you're applying makeup (or **making out**), we're guessing you don't give this delicate area as much thought as it deserves—until you end up with chapped lips, that is.

And when dryness strikes, it can be tough to figure out what to do to alleviate the peeling and/or cracking—especially when nothing seems to be helping. Here's the thing: There are a bunch of reasons why your lips flake on you, not to mention a variety of things you can do to moisturize them and find relief.

ADVERTISING



Here, dermatologists break down the most common causes of chapped lips and how to best treat them. Consider this advice lip service at its finest.

First, it's helpful to know how your lips differ from the rest of the skin on your body.

Some noteworthy distinctions come into play: There are no sebaceous or oil glands in the lips themselves, which alone ups your likelihood of experiencing dryness and chapping,

Rachel Westbay, MD, a board-certified dermatologist at Marmur Medical in New York City, tells SELF.¹ As a quick reminder, these glands are found pretty much everywhere else on the body, except the palms and soles, and they produce oil that acts as a natural moisturizer; without them, your lips are at a disadvantage from the outset.

The stratum corneum, the outermost layer of your skin, is also different on and around your lips. More specifically, it's thinner—anywhere from three to five cellular layers thick as compared to up to 16 layers on the skin on the rest of your face.¹ The lips' epithelium (the thin tissue that covers all surfaces of your body) is also non-keratinized and has a poor ability to retain moisture, Dr. Westbay explains.¹ (That simply means it lacks keratin, a protein present in skin cells, and can't hold onto water.)²

All of the factors above make this particular part of your face more delicate and prone to irritation. Couple that with the fact that lips are pretty much constantly exposed to the elements, and you've got yourself a recipe for dryness and chapping.

What causes chapped lips, exactly, and how can you keep them soft and smooth?

The problem: cold, dry weather

If your lips start to peel and flake as soon as the temperature drops, it's definitely not your imagination. "In dry, cold weather, the moisture inside our skin cells essentially gets sucked out and into the environment," **Martiza Perez, MD**, a board-certified dermatologist and professor of dermatology at the University of Connecticut, tells SELF. Blame the chemistry of osmosis, in which water molecules always travel from areas of high concentration to low concentration—in this case, the moisture in your lips is moving into the drier, non-humid air. And, as we mentioned, the lips are largely unprotected against harsh weather and are already bad at retaining moisture in the first place.

The fix: Think beyond lip balm.

If your lips are super chapped and peeling, you may find that your regular **lip balm** isn't enough, even if you reapply it liberally. The dermatologists SELF spoke with recommend upping the ante by using an ointment containing occlusive ingredients, like petrolatum and dimethicone, which completely coat and seal the skin to lock in moisture. Vaseline, or petroleum jelly, is a prime example, however, just keep in mind that while it will help trap

any water that's already in the lips, it doesn't in itself add hydration or offer any type of reparative properties that will treat dryness, Dr. Perez points out.

You have a couple of options: You can apply petroleum jelly on top of a lip balm that contains hydrating ingredients, notes Dr. Westbay; shea butter and jojoba oil are good ones to look for, she says. Or you could take a gentle, very plain **moisturizer** (that's fragrance-free and doesn't contain "**actives**"), dab that onto your lips, then apply a coat of petroleum jelly over top, Dr. Perez says. Ideally, she suggests looking for a moisturizer with **ceramides**, ingredients that are well-known for their **skin-barrier**-strengthening properties.³ Her top pick: CeraVe's Moisturizing Cream (\$7, **Amazon**).

To make your life a little easier, you can also opt for an all-in-one product that's both occlusive and contains hydrating ingredients. For example, CeraVe's Healing Ointment (\$20, **Amazon**) relies on petrolatum but also has ceramides and **hyaluronic acid** in the mix, **Monika Kiripolsky, MD**, a board-certified dermatologist in Beverly Hills, tells SELF. Dr. Westbay says Aquaphor Healing Ointment (\$15, **Amazon**) is a nice choice, too, since it contains panthenol, a humectant that pulls water into the upper layer of the skin: "It's a highly effective combo for optimizing water content and locking it in where it's needed," she explains.

The problem: lip licking

Constantly licking your lips (and by the same token, drooling in your sleep) is also a potential problem. "Not only can enzymes in saliva break down the skin, but lips constantly getting wet and then drying out further breaks down the barrier and leads to chapping," Dr. Kiripolsky says.

It can be a vicious cycle at that; it makes sense that when your lips feel dry you may innately want to lick them to moisten them. But this is so common that the subsequent chapping and irritation is often referred to as "lip-licker's dermatitis," Dr. Westbay adds.

The fix: Keep your lips coated, day and (especially) night.

We know, it's easier said than done, but Dr. Westbay suggests trying to be as aware as possible of how often you're licking your lips. Keeping them regularly coated with lip balm can help because if they feel less dry, you may be less tempted to lick. There's no set rule regarding how often you should swipe on lip balm; Dr. Westbay says as often as you feel is needed is fine. Just make sure you definitely apply it before bed. Not only can this

counteract the dehydrating drool we mentioned above, but the amount of moisture that naturally evaporates out of the skin (known as transepidermal water loss or TEWL) is higher at night, she notes, making it prime time to load up on **hydrating products**—for your lips, face, and body.⁴

The problem: allergic or irritant contact dermatitis

In less clinical terms, a certain ingredient your lips are exposed to may be triggering an **allergic reaction** or simply creating irritation. “This causes inflammation that impairs the skin barrier, leading to more dryness, as well as redness in some skin tones, burning, and itching,” Dr. Westbay explains.

There are many ingredients that are frequently to blame, including sodium lauryl sulfate and pyrophosphates (common in toothpaste), cinnamon flavoring, and dyes and fragrances found in many lip products, notes Dr. Kiripolsky. It also bears mentioning that an allergy can come on at any time. “People come to me and say ‘Oh, I’ve used this particular lip product for 10 years and never had an issue,’ but developing an allergy suddenly is quite common,” she notes.

The fix: Use gentle lip products (and maybe see a dermatologist).

More specifically, that means avoiding formulas that contain fragrance and flavors, advises Dr. Perez. (It’s smart to steer clear of menthol, camphor, and eucalyptus, too, all of which can also cause irritation, per the **American Academy of Dermatology**.) Instead, the experts we consulted recommend looking for balms and other products that contain hydrating ingredients like shea butter, vitamin E, and/or glycerin. One to try: Chagrin Valley Soap & Salve’s Creamy Shea Lip Balm (\$5, **Chagrin Valley Soap & Salve**)..

If switching to milder lip products doesn’t help, it’s smart to book an appointment with a **dermatologist**, who can order a **patch test** to determine if your chapped lips are stemming from an allergy to a particular ingredient, Dr. Kiripolsky says.

The problem: oral isotretinoin, a.k.a. Accutane

This prescription **acne medication** is notorious for its skin-drying effects, including chapped lips. The drug shrinks sebaceous glands, but that obviously doesn’t apply to the lips, where there are no oil glands to begin with. It’s not entirely clear why Accutane causes chapping specifically.⁵ However, research has shown a higher level of TEWL in the lips of

people taking oral isotretinoin (which, as we mentioned earlier, is a major dehydrator), and experts believe an impaired skin barrier is to blame here, too, Dr. Westbay notes.⁶

The fix: Focus on replenishing moisture.

The above guidance on the best (and worst) ingredients and products for chapped lips applies here, too, according to our experts—especially the advice to opt for thicker ointments versus standard balms. (They're the best way to really lock in as much moisture as possible.) Dr. Westbay says using a **humidifier** in your bedroom—to help minimize that overnight moisture loss we mentioned—can also be helpful.

And if you're dealing with seriously flaking skin, you can also consider exfoliating your lips—but with a few important caveats. (Our experts were actually split on this topic.) Dr. Kiripolsky and Dr. Perez generally advise against exfoliating your lips when they're actively peeling or flaking, citing the potential for further irritation.

However, Dr. Westbay says that if done correctly, with a gentle product, it can help minimize a scraggly appearance. She recommends using a sugar-based scrub, like her pick: Fresh's Sugar Lip Polish Exfoliator (\$21, **Sephora**). "Brown sugar crystals gently buff away dry skin, an optimal choice because they're minimally abrasive and can't cause microtears the way other physical exfoliants, such as crushed shells, can," she says. "Sugar is also a humectant, and the formula has shea butter and jojoba oil to make it even more moisturizing."

The takeaway here: If want to try exfoliating your lips in an attempt to get rid of noticeable flaking, make sure you're using a scrub that's hydrating and not too abrasive, and be extra gentle with it. Lightly massage it onto your lips—there's no need to rub and scrub super hard—and reserve exfoliation for occasional use, rather than making it a part of your daily routine.

The problem: certain vitamin deficiencies

Though rare, this is a possibility. "Mineral and vitamin deficiencies, specifically in zinc, iron, and B vitamins, can cause chapped lips," Dr. Westbay says.⁷ More specifically, low levels of B12 are associated with generally dry lips, while a deficiency in zinc, iron, B6, and B2 can play a role in angular cheilitis in the corners of the lips," Dr. Westbay explains.^{8 9} (Angular cheilitis refers to inflammation and painful cracks that form at the corners of the mouth and may then become infected.)¹⁰

The fix: See a doctor.

Your dermatologist or primary care provider can order blood work to determine if you are, in fact, low or deficient in any of these vitamins. If that's the case, they can help you come up with an appropriate treatment plan, which may involve supplements or prescription medications. Angular cheilitis, in particular, may require the use of topical antifungals or antibiotics.

The problem: sun damage

It may seem slightly counterintuitive, given that most of us associate chapped lips with winter, but sun exposure can absolutely dry out your lips (and the rest of your skin). Not to mention that if they're already chapped to begin with, they're going to be even more susceptible to sun damage, Dr. Perez notes. Oh, and let's also not forget that, unlike so many other spots on the body, the lips are essentially constantly exposed to the sun.

The fix: Load up on sunscreen.

Opting for a **lip balm with SPF** is the easiest way to safeguard them from UV rays in the first place (and protect them as they heal from any prior damage). To play it safe, especially if you have sensitive skin, Dr. Westbay suggests choosing a mineral-based option that relies on zinc oxide and/or titanium dioxide for sun protection; these ingredients are less likely to cause irritation than their chemical counterparts, she explains. (They're also more likely to leave a white cast, though, so you might want to opt for a tinted formula if that's a concern.) Make sure it has at least an SPF 30, too, she adds. EltaMD's UV Lip Balm Broad Spectrum SPF 36 (\$14, **Dermstore**) checks all the boxes.

If none of the DIY tips above are working, it's definitely time to see a dermatologist.

Not only can they rule out an underlying allergy or nutrient deficiency, but they can also ensure your chapped lips aren't actually something more serious. Case in point: "A type of precancer, actinic cheilitis, can pretty closely mimic chapped lips and needs to be treated so that it doesn't turn into **skin cancer**," Dr. Kiripolsky cautions.¹¹ (Although she does note that this condition typically affects just one area along the border of the lip, not the whole thing.)

If one of the more common culprits is to blame, though, the expert-approved fixes and product picks above should help put you on the path toward smoother, more moisturized lips. Now that's something to smile about!

Sources:

1. *StatPearls*, Anatomy, Head and Neck, Lips
2. *International Journal of Cosmetic Science*, Relationship Between Lip Skin Biophysical and Biochemical Characteristics with Corneocyte Unevenness Ratio as a New Parameter to Assess the Severity of Lip Scaling
3. *The Journal of Dermatology*, Clinical Significance of the Water Retention and Barrier Function-Improving Capabilities of Ceramide-Containing Formulations: A Qualitative Review
4. *Journal of Investigative Dermatology*, Time-Dependent Variations of the Skin Barrier Function in Humans: Transepidermal Water Loss, Stratum Corneum Hydration, Skin Surface pH, and Skin Temperature
5. *StatPearls*, Isotretinoin
6. *Annals of Dermatology*, The Effect of Evening Primrose Oil for the Prevention of Xerotic Cheilitis in Acne Patients Being Treated with Isotretinoin: A Pilot Study
7. *Clinical, Cosmetic, and Investigative Dermatology*, Challenges and Solutions in Oral Isotretinoin in Acne: Reflections on 35 Years of Experience
8. *International Journal of Molecular Sciences*, A Brief Review on Vitamin B₁₂ Deficiency Looking at Some Case Study Reports in Adults
9. *Official Publication of The College of Family Physicians of Canada*, Answer: Can you identify this condition?
10. *StatPearls*, Angular Cheilitis
11. *Frontiers in Medicine*, Actinic Cheilitis—From Risk Factors to Therapy

Related:

- Everything Dry Brushing Can—And Can't—Do for Your Skin
- Skin Cycling Is a TikTok Trend That Dermatologists Actually Like
- 17 of the Best Facial Cleansing Balms, According to Dermatologists



Melanie is a Chicago-based beauty writer and editor with 15 years of experience in the industry. She has worked as a beauty editor at several prominent publications, including *Shape*, *Health*, and *Good Housekeeping*. She now contributes to numerous national and regional print and digital outlets, covering not only beauty, but... [Read more](#)



SELF does not provide medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Any information published on this website or by this brand is not intended as a substitute for medical advice, and you should not take any action before consulting with a healthcare professional.

Topics lips Skin Care skin health

Sponsored Links by Taboola

Kempst 1 - Drawer Nightstand

\$99.99 - WAYFAIR

[Shop now](#)

Jarques 1 - Drawer Nightstand

\$81.99 - WAYFAIR

[Shop now](#)

Kempst X-Shaped Nightstand Set

\$104.99 - WAYFAIR

[Shop now](#)

Experts Say This Drugstore Wrinkle Cream Is Actually Worth It

BrunchesNCrunches

Heart Surgeon Begg Americans: "Stop Doing This To Your Avocados"

Gundry MD

Is a Roth IRA Conversion Really Worth It?

SmartAsset