Dear Alice,

I have had chronically chapped lips for months and have tried everything from herbal balms to Vaseline and nothing works, including not using anything. What should I do?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Chapped lips can be a real pain! They are caused by a number of different factors, so it may take some detective-work and trial and error for you to identify the culprit. It’s also possible that there are multiple irritants causing the pain in your pucker, not just one. Luckily, there are lots of options out there, including lifestyle changes, products, foods, and medical interventions that could help you resolve your chapped lips!

First, it might help to determine what is causing your chapped lips and some possible solutions. Various elements could be at play here, including:

- **Lip licking:** Instinctively, you may be tempted to lick your chapped smoocher, even without noticing. However, one of the worst things you can do to chapped lips is to lick ’em — doing so reduces the presence of moisture-rich natural oils on the lips. In turn, your lips get dry, so when you lick them again, it starts a cycle — lick, dryness, lick, more dryness, and so on. Try to be conscious of how often you lick your lips. Also, if your lips are flaky, resist the urge to pick or bite them.

- **Dehydration:** Is your environment dry? Using a humidifier or placing a pan or pot of water on a radiator can help add humidity to the surrounding air, which promotes the skin’s ability to retain moisture. Also, think about whether you’re getting enough water. Drinking eight to ten cups (one cup equals eight ounces) every day will help keep you and your lips hydrated.

- **Smoking:** Smoking evaporates natural oils off the lips, resulting in chapped, dry skin.

- **The great outdoors:** If you spend time outdoors, your symptoms may be a result of wind or sunburn. Try covering and moisturizing your lips with a gentle balm or petroleum jelly to protect them from the drying effects of wind and sun. You might also cover your face and lips with a light scarf to offer more protection. Finally, you could try a lip balm with sunscreen (look for one with SPF 15 or higher) to help prevent further chapping, but be
aware that sunscreen can also cause lip irritation.

- **Drugs:** Certain medications can dry out your lips. Oral acne medications are a common culprit. Check with your pharmacist or health care provider to determine whether any medications you’re taking could be responsible for your chapped lips.

- **Cosmetics:** Started using a new product since your chapped lips appeared? Many lipsticks, balms, lip-plumping products, lotions, anti-aging creams, and other cosmetics applied to or in close proximity of the lips contain allergy-inducing chemicals that could cause irritation. Also, sometimes plant-based waxes can cause irritation, as can fragrances and dyes in soaps, detergents, perfumes, etc. Products applied to the hands can be transmitted to the lips and cause irritation — this includes some varieties of nail polish. (Another reason to avoid touching the face with our hands!) A quick tip: if a product you are using makes your lips or skin around your lips feel tingly or warm, it may be causing irritation.

- **Dental work:** Perhaps you’ve recently gotten braces or had dental work done. Some nickel sensitivities can develop from the metal used in orthodontics (or in jewelry and piercings). Also, if you have latex sensitivities, the exam gloves used by a dentist or orthodontist could cause lip irritation. Let your dental provider know and they can use latex-free gloves for your exams in the future.

- **Food:** Certain spicy, salty, or acidic foods can trigger dry, cracked lips. For example, mango peel contains a chemical called toxicodendron (also found in poison ivy) that can irritate the lips. Try eliminating very spicy or acidic foods from your diet for a couple of weeks to determine whether a certain food or type of food is the source of your chronically dry lips.

Chapped lips are rarely a symptom of another underlying issue, but some medical conditions including fungal infections, anemia, and malnutrition may increase the likelihood of dry lips. If you’re experiencing any other symptoms or you try all of the above suggestions with no relief, it’s recommended that you make an appointment with your health care provider to rule out more serious conditions. If you’ve been struggling for a long time, then a visit to your health care provider, dermatologist, or allergy specialist might help to accelerate the identification of a cause.

Alice!

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