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## How to take care of chapped lips this winter

The winter months can wreak havoc on our lips, leaving them dry, flaky and sore. It can be extremely uncomfortable and irritating, not to mention unsightly.

So why does this time of year cause chapped lips – and is there anything we can do to protect them and prevent the problem?

"Cold and windy [weather](#) can have negative effects on our skin," explains Dr Anton Alexandroff of the [British Association of Dermatologists](#).

"The winter weather can strip the skin of moisture, leading the [skin to become dry](#), chapped and prone to flaking," he adds. "Our lips are particularly vulnerable to this as they are so often exposed to the elements, and the skin is thinner than on other parts of our body."

The skin on our lips has just three to five cellular layers, compared to typical facial skin, which has up to 16 layers. The lips also lack the oil glands found in other parts of the skin. Therefore as the weather gets colder and there is less humidity, the outdoor air combined with the indoor central heating can dehydrate our skin and cause lips to crack, peel and bleed – a condition known as common cheilitis.

### What else can cause chapped lips in winter?

The weather isn't always the cause of sore lips, however. "Dry or chapped lips can be caused by a number of factors, such as [eczema](#) or [contact allergic dermatitis](#)," says Dr Daniel Glass, consultant skin specialist at [The Dermatology Clinic](#) in London.

"Sometimes infections such as [candida](#) or staphylococcus can cause inflammation of the corner of the lips, as can [iron](#) or [vitamin B](#) deficiency. The initial infection with the herpes or [cold sore virus](#) can result in eroded, scaly skin on the lips."

[Coeliac disease](#) can lead to inflammation of the corners of the mouth, which can be mistaken for chapping. Certain drugs can cause dry chapped lips, most commonly retinoids such as isotretinoin used in [acne treatment](#). If you already struggle with dry lips, cold and wintery weather can make the problem worse.

## How can you prevent or treat chapped lips?

Dr Alexandroff advises to moisturise your lips regularly, reapplying throughout the day and before bed. "It's also important to make sure that you stay hydrated by drinking plenty of water," he adds.

Dry lips can also be helped by gentle exfoliation to ensure you are removing any dry flaky skin from the surface of your lips. Although this won't address the problem, it may help to reduce the scale sitting on the surface of the lips.

### Check the ingredients

Although many of us tend to have a range of different lip balms stashed away in our coat pockets and bags, and on our bedside tables, it's important to make sure you are using the right balm to avoid making your lips more sore.

"There can be ingredients in some lip balms that can cause eczematous [dermatitis](#) which can affect the lips and the skin surrounding the lips," explains Dr Daron Seukeran, group medical director for the skincare clinic group [sk:n](#).

### **These include:**

- Propolis.
- Lanolin.
- Coconut oil.
- Almond oil.
- Peppermint oil.
- Vitamin E.

Dr Vishal Madan, consultant dermatologist at [Everything Skin Clinic](#), says bland emollients such as Vaseline can be good – as risk of allergy to those is rare – and advises looking out for hypoallergenic balms too.

"The most important thing when purchasing a lip balm is to make sure that it works for you," he says. "If your lips burn, sting, or feel uncomfortable when you apply a product to your lips, it is irritating your lips. If this is the case, you should stop using this product and try another one."

### **Make small lifestyle changes**

This includes:

- Washing your hands before applying lip balm.
- Try not to pick or bite any flaky skin, as doing so can slow down the healing process.
- Avoiding licking dry or cracked lips as this can make them more sore.
- Bearing in mind that some foods, such as spicy meals, may irritate sore lips.
- Wearing a scarf over your mouth to protect the delicate skin on your lips, if going out into the wind and cold.
- If you forget your balm while out with friends, don't share theirs – as tempting as it might be, this can spread germs.

### **Visit your doctor or pharmacist**

You should seek medical help if your lips are hot, painful, red and swollen - as it could be a sign of infection. If the chapping is very severe or doesn't heal, it may be a sign of another problem, so it's worth having it checked by a doctor or skin specialist.

If you have a small, fluid-filled blister on your lip or around your mouth, you may have a [cold sore](#). Cold sores should start to heal within 10 days, but are contagious and may be irritating or painful while they heal. Antiviral creams and patches are available from your pharmacist.

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