



Winterize your lips and stay kissable through New Year's Eve

By Susan Stevens | Daily Herald Staff

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The skin on your lips isn't like the rest of your face. It's more vulnerable.

Your lips lack sweat glands and oil glands and the protective barrier they provide. The skin is thinner, allowing red blood vessels to show through and more moisture to evaporate.

Your lips also take a lot of abuse. They're exposed to winter wind and dry indoor air, not to mention saliva -- which has enzymes that dry out the skin.

It's no wonder your lips can end up painfully chapped by December. Follow our experts' advice, and you'll be thoroughly kissable by New Year's Eve.

A balm for sore lips

Rule No. 1: Wear lip balm, especially during the winter.

But keep in mind that some balms can make chapped lips worse. If your lips are sensitive or dry, avoid products with menthol, said Barrington dermatologist Dr. Amy Derick. The chilling sensation feels good at first, but ultimately will dry your lips even more as it evaporates.

"Avoid products with a lot of extra ingredients like flavoring or colors," said Dr. Christina Steil, a dermatologist in Hinsdale. "This may aggravate the lip problem."

Something as simple as Vaseline puts an effective barrier between your lips and the weather, Derick said.

Hydrating balms often contain shea butter, petrolatum or essential oils. Or you can use your facial moisturizer on your lips if you don't mind the taste, Steil advises. Running a humidifier can help replace moisture in dry indoor air, keeping your skin hydrated, Derick said.

Don't lick your lips; it will just dry them out. "If your hands get dry and you put them in water,

they can get more chapped. Same with your lips," Steil said.

When you change into your fall or winter wardrobe, change your lip balm, too. The thin gloss you use in summer may not cut it in a Chicago winter, said Mary Ozment, medical aesthetician at Radiance MedSpa in Wheaton.

"You need something that's a little more emollient or has humectants in it, heavier creams, things that are going to soak into your skin," she said. "When you live in the Midwest, you're getting all four seasons in one week sometimes, and it takes some time for your skin to adjust."

If you're worried about the ingredients in lip products (such as the lead recently detected in some popular lipsticks), a dermatologist or aesthetician can guide you. Pharmaceutical-grade products available at doctors' offices or in medical spas may have more research to back up their effectiveness. Or do your own research at www.safecosmetics.org, the site of the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics, which recently tested lipsticks.

Follow the sun

Speckles and rough spots might not be a sign of dry, chapped lips -- they could actually be age spots or even pre-cancerous lesions.

The skin of your lips lacks melanin, which offers some protection to the skin on the rest of your body. Your lips can get sunburned, produce freckles and age spots, and develop skin cancer.

Lip balms alone won't prevent it; you need to use sunscreen. And don't stop now.

"There are a lot of part-time sunscreen users out there," said Heidi Sanchez, an aesthetician at Black Tie Affair Day Spa and Salon in Bartlett. "People think they just have to wear sunscreen in the summer, but the winter can be just as dangerous to our skin."

Not all lip balms contain sunscreen. Either look for one that does or use sunscreen before applying it.

If you're skiing, look for a lip balm with SPF 30, Derick advises. Choose one that offers both UVA and UVB protection. Ingredients to look for include titanium dioxide or zinc oxide.

Exfoliate, exfoliate

Moisturizers will work better with a little gentle exfoliation first, experts said. You can use a soft washcloth to rub the dead skin cells off your lips a few times a week, Derick says.

Or try a skin-care product that contains low levels of alpha or beta hydroxy acids. These

overnight treatments gently slough off the dead skin cells, allowing moisturizers to penetrate more deeply.

But be gentle.

"Once the dead skin heaps up, people have a tendency to pick," Derick said. "Ripping it off is very bad for the skin because it makes a little wound that has to heal. You can get in a vicious cycle of having dry dead skin you're constantly peeling off."

If your skin is more sensitive, look for products with less-abrasive ingredients, Ozment said.

"Pay attention to what the granule is," she said. "Some are harsher than others. If you have sensitive skin, stick to something that's a little smaller."

If you want to really pamper your lips, some spas offer lip-focused facial treatments to buff and smooth your kisser. Black Tie Affair Day Spa offers a \$20 lip treatment that includes a citrus enzyme lip exfoliator, a hydrating mask and a citrus lip balm.

"If your lips are really chapped, you definitely need some exfoliation and some healing," Sanchez said.

A message to men

Men have basically the same skin as women and should pay attention to their lips, especially over the winter, aestheticians said.

"Women love to kiss men with soft lips, Sanchez said. "We don't want someone with chapped lips any more than they want to kiss someone with chapped lips."

Some products offer the same moisturizing and protecting benefits, but without fruity flavors or other additives that can turn men away.

"Men usually are drawn to things that don't have a lot of fragrance, things that are packaged simply," Ozment said.

Not just skin deep

Sometimes your lip problems are more than skin deep. Here's how experts advise treating some common lip woes.

- If you have tiny cuts in the corner of your mouth, or the corners are particularly chapped and raw, it could be a yeast infection, Derick said. A dermatologist can prescribe an antifungal gel or topical steroid cream.

- A rash around the mouth may indicate an allergy to an ingredient in a cosmetic or toothpaste. A lot of people have reactions to cinnamon-flavored toothpaste, as well as mangoes, Derick said. If eliminating suspected allergens doesn't help, a dermatologist can help pinpoint what's triggering the rash.

- Wrinkles around your lips develop with age, smoking and sun exposure. Creams with hydroxy acids will help soften fine wrinkles, Sanchez said. Other products can help increase collagen production. For deeper lines, injected fillers like Restylane and Juvederm restore volume and can last six months or longer.

- Thin lips are common as people age and lose collagen. Collagen injections can plump up lips, and so can injections of Restylane or Juvederm, Derick said.

"You get an immediate response, and it's well-tolerated," she said. "People don't want huge Angelina Jolie lips. They want lips they can put lipstick on."

A note on those instant lip-plumping lipsticks popular on the market. They work by causing small amounts of inflammation in your lips, providing instant but temporary results.

Derick advises avoiding those during the winter.

"They act by causing irritation on the lip surface, and if your lips are dry it could make it worse," she said.