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# Chapped lips

Learn how the sun can harm your lips. *By Dr. Susan Maples*

Q: I tend to have sore chapped lips and cracks in the corners of my mouth every summer. Do you have any advice for me?

A: Summertime can be brutal on our luscious lips, as we spend more time outdoors in the sun and wind. Many people use lip balms for soothing damaged lips rather than for protecting them from the damage itself. Not only does the sun burn and chap your lips but long term sun exposure increases your risk of squamous cell carcinoma, especially along the border of your lower lip (the vermillion border). The angle of the mid-day sun makes that border a perfect target. With years of repeated sun damage, you might notice that border fades, such that your facial skin blends right into your lip, thereby further increasing your cancer risk. So my best advice is to maintain sun protection by repeated application of a lip balm that has at least a SPF15.

Speaking of lip balms, it is prudent to look at ingredients. I see many patients who have a detrimental reaction to the lip balm itself, resulting in lined, corrugated, cracked or inflamed lips. Most of those reactions are from cooling agents so I recommend staying away from balms with menthol, phenol or camphor altogether. Realize also, that by the time you have finished a lip balm you have *eaten* it entirely, so I like to recommend only those that are filled with natural oils and waxes such as bees wax, organic olive oil, organic palm oil, evening primrose oil, etc. Avoiding preservatives may mean the balm won't stay fresh in your golf bag till next summer, but it is much healthier for you overall.

The cracks in the corners of your mouth are called *angular cheilitis*. The moist fold of the commissure (corner) is a perfect environment to host a fungus, which keeps it red and inflamed. Angular cheilitis is often seen in elderly patients (with or without associated cracks) from over closure of the jaws. This condition is easily treated with an antifungal ointment prescribed by your dentist such as Kenalog in Orabase but can also be treated by over the counter antifungal ointments such as Clotrimazole cream.

Lastly, if you have any lip ailment that persists over time, by all means consult your dentist.