

What your lips can tell you

Our lips move flexibly, smiling, frowning, forming words, or puckering for a kiss. And they're made of some of the thinnest layers of skin on our body, making them receptive to touch and sensation. That thinness makes our lips vulnerable to drying, chapping, and other surface changes. And from time to time, a change in the way our lips look can indicate that something has gone awry or out of balance in our body.

You can do a spot-check yourself by looking in the mirror. But if you are concerned about anything you see, do not hesitate to consult a dentist, doctor, or dermatologist.

If your lips appear dry, cracked, or peeling...

Usually this means that you've been overexposed to the elements of nature like wind or sun or dry air. Or lips may appear dry or peeled when dehydration has set in. There are some other possible reasons for these symptoms:

Habitual or anxiety-triggered lip-biting

A dry lower lip that feels hard to the touch and has red speckles or a white filmy appearance is a sign of **sun damage** that could raise your risk of future skin cancer.

If you notice changes in the corners of your lips...

The moist nooks created by the folds of skin at the corners of your mouth can be real trouble spots:

Cheilitis is a type of yeast infection that most often happens to people with dentures. Cheilitis can be painful and cause the lip corners to crack, become inflamed, and even "weep." Avoid licking, rubbing, or irritating this delicate area to prevent infection, and if you wear dentures, be sure they fit well.

Thrush, another yeast infection, can cause curd-like white patches in the lip corners. When wiped off, the patches may become red, inflamed, and painful.

If your lips look swollen or inflamed...

You would surely know if you had taken a blow to the mouth that caused swelling - or if you had recently had collagen injected into your lips. But there are other possible causes:

An **allergic reaction** can set off swelling. Foods, beverages, medications, lipstick and other cosmetics, and even insect bites or airborne irritants could all be to blame. Consult with a doctor to find out how to reduce the inflammation and pinpoint and avoid your lip-swelling triggers in the future.

If you spot a sore on your lips...

Lip sores can be temporary, chronic, or episodic. And lip sores can be nothing much to worry about, easily treatable, or cause for greater concern:

A chronically **dry mouth** could create a sore in the corner of your lips. The causes of dry mouth include dehydration and use of certain medications.

A **mucocele** might pop up on the inside of your lower lip. It's a rubbery, bubble-like swelling which may look blue. Mucoceles occur when a salivary gland is blocked or injured, usually caused by trauma such as accidentally biting your lip.

One obvious source of lip sores is the **herpes simplex virus**. The HSV-1 type causes cold sores. If you've been infected by HSV-1, you may also experience a sore throat or tonsillitis. This virus spreads easily, so avoid direct lip-to-lip contact.

Similarly, a **syphilis** infection spreads easily with close contact and can trigger a cold-sore-like chancre (not to be confused with a canker sore, which are ulcers that crop up inside of the mouth). A chancre appears red and does not cause pain. Left untreated, syphilis may also cause a white mucous patch on the lip or inside of the mouth weeks after the chancre appeared.

A **fibroma** is an overgrowth of soft tissue that is typically benign. Most often, fibromas are pink, occasionally white or light-coloured, and if irritated can appear reddish or bluish. Likely causes are tooth-grinding, lip-biting, or the rub of poorly-fitted dentures or a sharp spot on the teeth or from braces.

If you smoke or drink, a fibroma may be a sign of **oral cancer**. Cancerous lip sores will often feel hard and will be attached to underlying tissue, while non-cancerous sores move freely.

Smokers may also notice a brown, flat, freckle-like spot right on their lips where they most often hold their cigarette or pipe. This is called a **smoker's patch** and may warn of skin cancer.

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