

## Addicted to Wet Lips?

As the lip balm industry grows bigger and bigger, customers are offered a fascinating array of brands and flavors. You can go for the conservative mint, or try the more adventurous watermelon shimmering gloss. People apply lip balm to keep their lips moisturized, or to keep up with the Hollywood-style of soft, shiny and luscious lips.

But some people use lip balms so often that it seems like an obsession. I, myself, glide that white little tube on my lips almost compulsively everyday. I even keep it under my pillow when I go to bed in case my lips need lubrication when I wake up in the middle of the night. A lot of my friends tease me by calling me a "lip balm addict." Can lip balm really be addictive? Does it contain any chemicals that make us want to use it more and more?

Before answering that question, let's make sure we know exactly what *addiction* is. Most people associate addiction with a habit that provides pleasure. But there's actually more to it. Scientifically speaking, addiction is a type of habit that is very difficult to break, characterized by "continuous or periodic impaired control over the consumption or usage of a certain substance, and preoccupation with the substance." Moreover, the addicted person will experience disagreeable, physical 'withdrawal symptoms', which vary from habit to habit. For instance, for the heroin addict, opiate withdrawal can be the most awful experience imaginable – a painful combination of cramps, cravings, vomiting, fever and cold, clammy sweats.

Heavy balm users like myself cannot imagine life without lubricated lips. If I don't carry my lip balm with me, I find myself obsessing over the dryness my lips, which feel like they're on the verge of completely shriveling up. Some people even claim to feel anxious and edgy if they don't have a container near them at all times. But the biggest consequence of 'quitting' cold turkey I expect would just be temporary discomfort. There are no withdrawal symptoms involved or excruciating physical pain due to the ceasing of lip balm usage. So why have so many people raised the issue of lip balm addiction to quasi epic proportions? As a matter of fact, there is even a website called *Lip Balm Anonymous* (<http://www.kevdo.com/lipbalm/>), "*the world's leading lip balm addiction website*". The website lists most known lip balm brands, provides testimonials, and even offers a twelve-step recovery program. Kevin Crossman, the founder of *Lip Balm Anonymous*, admits that he started the website in 1995 as a tongue-in-cheek take on the urban legend of lip balm addiction. But he believes there is truth behind the humor. "It's certainly not heroin," he says, "but to say it's a nonexistent phenomenon is not true, either."

Let's address the issue from a more scientific and rational view. Doctors and manufacturers state categorically that there is nothing addictive about lip balm. People feel the need to apply it repeatedly because some lip balms like Carmex or Mentholatum's Natural Ice (the one that I use) contain ingredients such as menthol, camphor, phenol and salicylic acid, which cause a pleasurable tingling or cooling sensation. They make the customers think that the lip balm is doing something, but they can also irritate the lips of some people. Once the oily part of the lip balm wears off, the lips feel dry and irritated and users want to reapply. Lip balm may cause people to lick their lips as well, especially the ones with flavors. Saliva washes off the lip balm and the natural oils in the skin, making the lips even dryer. That again may lead users into a cycle of putting on more lip balm. But lip skin normally isn't that moist, says Brad Rodu, an oral pathologist from the University of

Alabama at Krimingham. He doesn't say not to use lip balm, but maintains that people need not think that lips have to be wet all the time. Dr. Ari Demirjian, a McGill University dermatologist, also states that lip balm is not addictive unless it contains nicotine. Dr. Anna Guanche, a University of Minnesota dermatologist, suggests that heavy users get used to having well-moistened lips and may feel uncomfortable unless their lips are coated with something, but it's not an addiction. As a matter of fact, lip balms can provide valuable protection as a sunscreen, especially for men, who have higher rates of squamous cell cancer on their lips than women. That may be because women use lipstick, which often contains sun-blocking zinc oxide.

So lip balm addiction is just an urban legend, an Internet myth. However, there is absolutely nothing unreasonable about wanting to moisturize your skin with lotion and your lips with lip balm, especially with the harsh winters in Canada. But if you think you're addicted to lip balm, you're not. You've just gotten used to it. Stop, and in a while you'll get used to not having it. At least that's what I think. I just can't bring myself to try it.

*by Melody Ko*