

TCM: chapped lips

Our lips do not produce oil to prevent them against drying out, so chapped lips often occur in cold, windy and dry weather. The lips are also easily irritated by cosmetics or allergens.

In TCM theory, the mouth is the opening of the spleen system to the body's surface, while the stomach and large intestine meridians encircle the lips. Normal spleen functioning ensures a good appetite, enables taste buds to distinguish between flavours, and makes the lips appear rosy and lustrous. If the spleen is weak, it will result in a poor appetite, impaired sense of taste and pale lips.

TCM physicians can diagnose disharmonies of the body by observing the condition of the lips. Deep red and dry lips indicate excessive heat; bright red lips are seen in people with poor health. Bluish purple lips indicate blood stasis, and when they turn a dark blue this indicates a more serious condition. Dry and cracked lips show that the spleen and stomach need extra fluid for cooling. The heat in the spleen and stomach can travel to the mouth or lips and cause ulcers, while serious heat in the stomach can cause the lips to become itchy, painful and swollen. Some people may experience saliva dripping

from the corners of the mouth. TCM regards this as a result of the spleen failing to govern the movement of body fluids.

Physicians treat chapped lips only when they become a part of an overall health problem. For example, chapped lips may occur in cold and dry weather when the body adapts poorly to seasonal changes. At this time there may also be other symptoms such as a dry throat, a feeling of thirst, and itchiness. Physicians aim to invigorate the lungs to promote the distribution of body fluids and enhance their lubricating effect. Selected herbs are dendrobium, mulberry leaf and dwarf lily-turf tuber. Individuals who eat too many spicy and deep-fried foods can accumulate heat in the spleen and stomach which can lead to chapped lips and is often accompanied with bad breath, thirst, a big appetite, constipation and a thick, yellowish coating on the tongue. Physicians will treat this condition with golden thread rhizome, peppermint leaf and figwort root to clear the heat and moisten the body.

Chapped lips may appear while recovering from an acute febrile infection. They indicate that body fluids

need to be replenished and that the kidneys and liver need further nourishment. The usual herbs for this are anemarrhena rhizome, rehmannia root and cornus fruit. In menopausal women, if chapped lips are accompanied with thirst, irritability, chest discomfort and insomnia, the herbal remedy will aim to harmonise the liver and spleen; in this case herbs such as peony root bark, gardenia fruit and bupleurum root are used.

If chapped lips become inflamed or itchy physicians aim to clear the heat in the stomach and large intestine meridians so as to suppress the swelling. Herbs used to treat this can include gypsum, honeysuckle flower or a forsythia capsule. When inflamed chapped lips become chronic, a blood deficiency could be involved, and thus rehmannia root, red peony root and angelica root are used to promote the blood. Topical applications are often combined with herbal decoctions for inflamed lips.

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