

Lip Service

Balms can be difficult to resist

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Ask habitual lip balm users about their habit, and some of them answer sheepishly.

"I noticed I had a little problem," says John Eichel, an 18-year-old employee of Princeton Sports in Columbia, Md. He claims not to panic if he can't find his ChapStick, but it really stinks, Eichel says, "if your lips are all chapped and it feels like razor blades are cutting into them."

Then there's Jacqueline Bethea, a 25-year-old Chicago entrepreneur who started a Web site for buying lip balm. "I personally revel in my addiction," she says.

Even as some medical experts suggest that lip balm dependency can border on the obsessive, the balm has evolved to become a customized staple of pocket pharmacopeias everywhere and a source of avid discussion among dry-lipped connoisseurs.

Bethea's site, Lipmedic.com, offers more than 250 varieties of balms from 70 labels. Emollient enthusiasts numbering 2,000 subscribe to Lipmedic's online newsletter.

Bethea is surprised that she hasn't been panned by Lip Balm Anonymous (www.kevdo.com/lipbalm), which takes a humorous yet serious approach to the question of lip-balm dependency. The site features a 12-step approach to shake the habit, but also challenges lip-balm marketing strategies, including the promotion of products that pander to kids.

To be sure, lip-balm manufacturers have penetrated the market at every level, from ChapStick, which costs \$1.69 a tube on Drugstore.com, to more expensive organic unguents found in exclusive boutiques.

Wyeth Consumer Healthcare, the maker of ChapStick, produced 130 million tubes of the product last year, according to company spokesman Fran Sullivan. In general, U.S. sales of lip balms totaled \$268 million at the retail level in 2002, according to a Kline & Co. Cosmetics & Toiletries USA report.

Still, manufacturers take seriously urban legends in circulation that promulgate the idea that lip balm is unhealthy and perhaps even addictive.

On its Web site, the lip balm manufacturer Carmex debunks what the company calls "misconceptions," including the rumor that its product "contains a terrible acid that roughs up your lips and actually makes you need more Carmex."

The lip balm industry is regulated by the Food and Drug Administration, and ingredients for the product, which is usually classified as a cosmetic, must be approved by the agency. "The legend that somehow we put an ingredient in there that makes your lips more chapped, so you have to go out and buy more ChapStick, grand conspiracy theory," Sullivan says.

Different lip balms protect the lips in different ways. Ingredients such as petrolatum, cocoa butter and beeswax seal moisture already within the lips, while glycerin and other humectants draw water to the skin.

Dermatologists say lip balm use can become habitual, if not addictive in the technical sense of the word. "It is literally a \$300-million market for a product that normally should not be needed at all," says Monte S. Meltzer, chief of dermatology at Union Memorial Hospital in Baltimore. "Lips are perfectly designed to take care of themselves."

And yet, the protracted use of lip balm is an "extraordinarily common behavior pattern," Meltzer notes. He attributes the vicious cycle of lip balm use to products that contain irritants such as menthol or camphor.

Although these ingredients add a pleasant, anesthetic tingle to the lips, they also cause peeling and dryness, prompting users to lick their lips. Saliva actually "digests the lips," making them thinner and less able to contain moisture, spurring the need for more lip balm, he says.

"People are known to have become dependent on lip balms," adds Jerome Litt, a Cleveland dermatologist and author of several skin care books. "There are many lip-lickers, which itself is a habit. So in order to try to remedy this habit, they believe that applying a lip balm will help them."

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