

Lip Plumpers: Do They Work?

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Can you get fuller lips from a tube?

Call it the pursuit of the padded pucker. In the last decade, scores of over-the-counter products have hit the market, promising to produce puffier, and sexier, lips.

Do they work?

"Women need to be realistic in what they can expect from these products," says **Paul M. Friedman, MD, a clinical assistant professor of dermatology at the University of Texas Medical School**. In other words, none of these products will come close to enlarging your lips the way a \$400 injection of a filler such as Restylane or Juvederm will.

But can you skip the needle and still get a prettier pout?

Here's what you need to know.

Can You Get Fuller Lips From a Tube?

Tinted or clear, in the form of a gloss, balm, stick, gel, or pot, traditional lip plumpers fatten the lips -- temporarily -- sometimes by irritating them.

Containing ingredients like cinnamon, ginger mint, wintergreen, or capsaicin -- the fiery compound in hot peppers -- they boost blood flow to the lips, leading to mild swelling and redness.

"These can give you a temporary enhancement that might last a couple of hours," says dermatologist Patricia Farris, MD, a clinical assistant professor at Tulane University School of Medicine.

It's these ingredients that also cause the telltale tingle or stinging. Although some people find that sensation uncomfortable, others welcome it as evidence that the plumper is working.

That burn, along with the high shine of many of the plumping products, may be what leads to the illusion of a fuller pout, even if it can't be measured by calipers. *Consumer Reports* tested 12 popular lip plumpers priced from \$3.60 to \$36 in November 2007. Their advice: "Kiss these products good-bye." They found that even the best lip plumpers caused lips to bulge only slightly.

But if women find the bulge worth the burn, dermatologists see little risk in using these products, as long as they're not overused.

"In general, I'm not a big fan of any ingredient that irritates the skin," Friedman says. "If you apply too much of these plumpers and use them too frequently they can potentially cause dryness and scaling."

Still, he adds, "I haven't seen any problems in my practice and my wife uses them herself. They can provide a short-lived instant gratification."

Tasha Reiko Brown, a Hollywood makeup artist, says she occasionally uses a lip plumper for special events, layering it as a primer underneath lipstick and gloss. And if a client wants the fullest lips possible, she augments these with a dab of shimmery eye shadow or highlighter dabbed on the center of the lips. "It makes your lips seem just a little more bee-stung," she says.

Treatment Plumpers

If plumping glosses provide on-the-spot pout enhancement, a new generation of lip plumpers promises to deliver more lasting results. Sometimes sold in two-step sets with a cosmetic plumper, these treatment products contain ingredients such as peptides, marine collagen, and human growth factors. Use them regularly, these products claim, and they'll stimulate your lips to produce more pout-boosting collagen and elastin.

"These won't give you an Angelina Jolie mouth," Farris says. "You have to be born with that. But they might have some therapeutic benefits."

At the very least, she says, many of the lip-conditioning plumpers contain humectants that help lips retain moisture.

"That hydration alone can improve lines and wrinkles, and in turn may give you a bit more fullness," Farris says. They may also contain hyaluronic acids, which increase lip volume by pulling moisture from the environment or trapping water that would otherwise evaporate from the skin.

The Scrubbing Effect

Makeup artists sometimes prep lips for lipstick by rubbing a wet, nubby washcloth across the mouth.

Lip exfoliators are a convenient update on this old trick. Sold by themselves or with either cosmetic or therapeutic lip plumpers, these exfoliators use gentle ingredients like sugar or poppy seeds, or mild acid exfoliants to buff away dry skin. That gentle scrubbing amplifies the natural color of lips and provides a smooth, crease-free surface, so that the application of a plumping lip gloss creates an even more heightened illusion of voluptuous lips.

The bottom line, says Farris: Lip plumpers are generally harmless and may provide a slight lip-enhancing effect.

And if you are going to use a lip plumper, Farris suggests making sure it packs a benefit by choosing one with an SPF. "Our lips are always exposed to the environment," she says, "but we generally don't think about protecting them."