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Solar cheilitis

What is solar cheilitis?

Solar cheilitis is a term used to describe benign or pre-malignant changes on the lip due to chronic sun exposure. It is also often called actinic cheilitis.

The word "cheilitis" means an inflammatory condition of the lips. Solar cheilitis affects the vermilion, i.e. the red part of the lip.

What are the symptoms of solar cheilitis?

Solar cheilitis most commonly results in the following features:

- Dry lips
- Thinned skin of the lips
- Scaly patches

Less common features of solar cheilitis include:

- Swelling of the lip
- Redness and soreness
- Ulceration and crusting
- Loss of demarcation between the vermilion border of the lip and its adjacent skin
- Prominent folds and lip lines
- White thickened patches (leukokeratosis)
- Discoloured skin with pale or yellow areas

Well-defined scaly areas on the lips in solar cheilitis may be [solar keratoses](#) or Bowen's disease ([squamous cell carcinoma in situ](#)).

Invasive [squamous cell carcinoma](#) should be suspected if a persistent ulcer or lump develops.

Actinic cheilitis





What is the cause of solar cheilitis?

Solar cheilitis is due to damage to cellular DNA by chronic sun exposure. Smoking may contribute; cheilitis tends to be more severe in smokers.

Investigations

In most cases, no specific investigations are required in solar cheilitis. A [skin biopsy](#) may be taken if [skin cancer](#) or an inflammatory skin disease is suspected.

The pathologist may report premalignant changes in the cells of the epidermis (outer layer of the skin) and sun-related changes such as elastosis in the underlying dermis (connective tissue layer).

Management

Treatment options include:

- [Cryotherapy](#)
- [5-fluorouracil cream](#)
- [Imiquimod cream](#)
- [Topical retinoids](#)
- [Photodynamic therapy](#)

Limiting sun exposure, wearing a hat with a good brim, and using a lip balm containing [sunscreen](#) are recommended. Men can consider growing a moustache. Smoking should be stopped.

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Related information

References:

- Cavalcante AS, Anbinder AL, Carvalho YR. Actinic cheilitis: clinical and histological features. J Oral Maxillofac Surg. 2008 Mar;66(3):498-503. [Medline](#).

On DermNet NZ:

- [Skin cancer](#)
- [Skin lesions, tumours and cancers](#)

Other websites:

Books about skin diseases:

See the [DermNet NZ bookstore](#)

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DermNet does not provide an on-line consultation service.
If you have any concerns with your skin or its treatment, see a [dermatologist](#) for advice.

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