

Cleft Lip and Cleft Palate

What are cleft lip and cleft palate?

A cleft lip is a separation of the upper lip. The cleft can occur on one or both sides of the lip. A cleft palate is a separation of the top of the mouth. Like cleft lip, cleft palate also can occur on one or both sides of the top of the mouth. Very often, someone who has a cleft lip also will have a cleft palate.

What causes cleft lip and cleft palate?

Cleft lip/palate is the fourth most common birth defect in the United States. One out of 700 babies is born with a cleft. Currently, it is not completely understood what determines cleft formation. Most information suggests a combination of both genetic/hereditary factors and environmental factors such as illness, alcohol abuse or nutritional deficiency during pregnancy. Regular prenatal care can help reduce the risks of birth defects.

How are cleft lip and cleft palate treated?

Cleft lip and cleft palate are usually treated surgically. The surgery should take place as a baby. Parents should consult a cleft lip/palate and craniofacial anomalies team. This team of professionals work together to make sure the baby receives the best care possible. Teams can be located by calling the Cleft Palate Foundation at 800-242-5338.

Are there special feeding issues for babies born with cleft lip or cleft palate?

A baby with only cleft lip usually does not experience feeding problems other than learning to attach to the nipple at the start of the feeding. Special nipples are currently available, if needed, to assist in feeding.

A baby with both a cleft lip and cleft palate, however, or with a cleft palate only, may need to be fed differently because there is an open area between the nose and mouth. It is best to hold the baby in an upright position to decrease the chance of milk leaking into the nose. Cleft palate babies also may swallow more air; thus frequent burping may be necessary.

The important point to remember is that the baby needs to receive proper nourishment through feeding. The baby's weight should be checked on a regular basis by a physician to ensure that he or she is gaining adequate weight.

Will a child with cleft lip or cleft palate have special dental needs?

All children require dental care; however, children with cleft lip or cleft palate require early evaluation by a dentist familiar with their special needs. These children may have problems with poorly positioned, malformed or missing teeth. Remember, though, with early detection and intervention, children with cleft lips or cleft palates can lead normal, healthy lives.

Where can a person learn more about cleft lip/cleft palate?

The Cleft Palate Foundation is a public service and education organization that provides services to patients and families. It also distributes informational brochures and fact sheets on clefts. The foundation's 24-hour toll-free hotline is 800-242-5338.

The University of Illinois' Division of Specialized Care for Children (DSCC) can provide information and refer patients and families to its nearest office. Call 800-322-3722.

The Illinois Early Childhood Intervention Clearinghouse provides library and information services about early childhood and disability issues. Its number is 800-852-4302.

For more information, contact

**Illinois Department of Public Health, Division of Oral Health
535 W. Jefferson St., Springfield, IL 62761
217-785-4899, TTY (hearing impaired use only) 800-547-0466**

NOTE: This fact sheet was derived from one previously published by the Arizona Department of Health Services.