

The Oral Health Connection



Cleft Lip and Cleft Palate

What is cleft lip and/or palate? And the Cause?

Cleft lip and cleft palate are **facial and oral malformations** that occur very early in pregnancy, while the baby is developing inside its mother. Clefing results when there is not enough tissue in the mouth or lip area, and the tissue that is available does not join together properly.

Cleft Lip

A **cleft lip** is a physical split or separation of the two sides of the upper lip and appears as a narrow opening or gap in the skin of the upper lip. This separation often extends beyond the base of the nose and includes the bones of the upper jaw and/or upper gum.



Cleft Palate

A **cleft palate** is a split or opening in the roof of the mouth. A cleft palate can involve the hard palate (the bony front portion of the roof of the mouth), and/or the soft palate (the soft back portion of the roof of the mouth).



Who Gets Cleft Lip and Cleft Palate?

Cleft lip, with or without cleft palate, affects one in 700 babies annually, and is the fourth most common birth defect in the U.S. Clefts occur more often in children of Asian, Latino, or Native American descent. According to the Connecticut Birth Defects Registry's estimated 2001-2004 data, there were 21 cases of cleft lip and 21 cases of cleft palate.

How Are Cleft Lip and Cleft Palate Diagnosed?

Obvious physical changes, a cleft lip or cleft palate is easy to diagnose. Prenatal ultrasound can sometimes determine if a cleft exists in an unborn child. A physical examination of the mouth, nose, and palate confirms the presence of cleft lip or cleft palate after a child's birth.

What's the Treatment?

A **cleft lip** may require one or two surgeries depending on the extent of the repair needed. The initial surgery is usually performed by the time a baby is 3 months old. Repair of a **cleft palate** often requires multiple surgeries over the course of 18 years. The first surgery to repair the palate usually occurs when the baby is between 6 and 12 months old. The initial surgery creates a functional palate, reduces the chances that fluid will develop in the middle ears, and aids in the proper development of the teeth and facial bones.

What Problems Are Associated With Cleft Lip and/or Palate?

- Eating problems
- Ear infections/hearing loss
- Speech problems.
- Dental Problems

What Is the Outlook for Children With Cleft Lip and/or Cleft Palate?

Although treatment for a cleft lip and/or cleft palate may extend over several years and require several surgeries depending upon the involvement, most children affected by this condition can achieve normal appearance, speech, and eating.