Let's Talk About...

Cleft lip and palate

What is a cleft lip or cleft palate?

When a baby is growing before birth, the face is forming, too. The left and right sides of the face start out separate, but they usually grow together (fuse together). This is very early in the pregnancy (first 4-12 weeks). In this way, the nose, lips, and mouth form. Sometimes, the lip or the palate (upper part of the mouth) do not fuse together completely. When this happens the baby will have a cleft lip, or cleft palate, or both.

Doctors are not sure what causes clefts.

The roof of the mouth, called the **palate** (PAL-ett), has two parts. The **hard palate** is in the front of the mouth. The **soft palate** is at the back of the mouth *(see Figure 1)*.

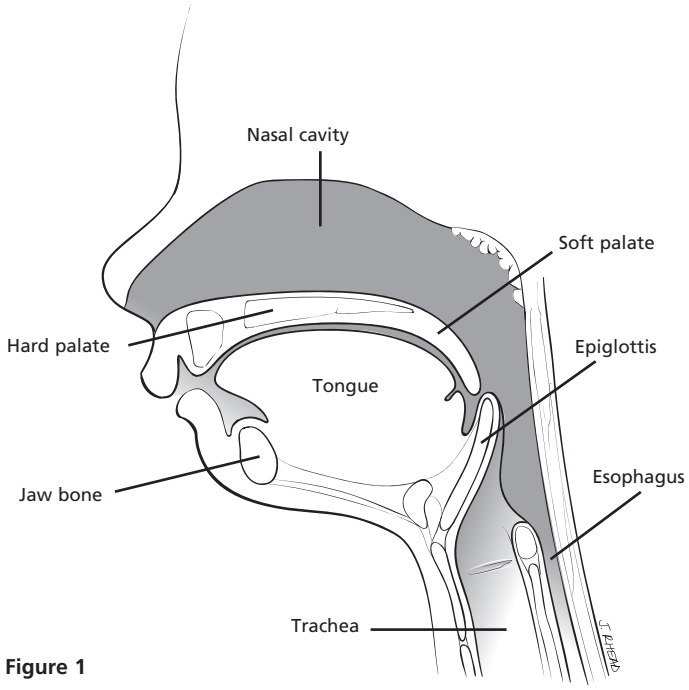


Figure 1

How often does this happen?

Out of every 700 babies born in the United States, one of them will have a cleft. More boys than girls are born with a cleft lip and palate, but more girls than boys are born with just a cleft palate.

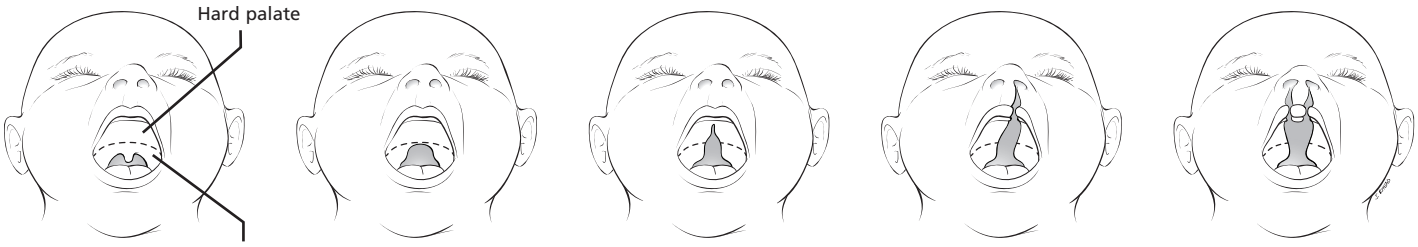
Are there different kinds of clefts?

There are several different kinds of clefts. The most common types of clefts are: one-sided (**unilateral** (you-nih-LAH-ter-all), two-sided (**bilateral** BUY-lah-ter-all), cleft of the hard palate only, or cleft of the soft palate only *(see Figure 2)*.

How does having a cleft affect my baby?

Babies born with a cleft are usually very healthy, but the cleft can present challenges. Every child

Figure 2



Normal | **Cleft of the soft palate** | **Cleft of the hard palate and soft palate** | **Unilateral cleft** | **Bilateral cleft**

is different. Your child may have problems with feeding, hearing, and speech. The cleft may interfere with jaw growth and development or cause dental problems.

Will my baby have problems feeding?

Babies born with just a cleft lip can usually nurse like other babies. Babies born with a cleft palate will have a hard time making a seal around the nipple to create suction. If your baby is unable to breastfeed, you can use a breast pump and a special bottle designed to make feeding easier. Members of the cleft palate/**craniofacial** (cray-nee-oh-FAY-shull) team can show you the choices available. You may have to try different products to find the one that works best for you and your child.

When feeding, a baby with a cleft palate may have milk run out of his nose. This is not a health risk. Have a soft cloth on hand to wipe the milk away. Feed your baby in an upright position to help milk flow down his throat. This will decrease the amount of milk in his nose. Babies with clefts tend to swallow more air and need to be burped more often than other children. With a little time and patience, you will become an expert at feeding your baby.

Are my baby's ears affected?

Babies with cleft lip or palate often have problems in the ear. There is a small tube in the ear called a eustachian (you-STAY-shun) tube. This connects the middle ear (inside the ear) to inside the nose and throat. Normally, it drains fluid from the ear. Often, the eustachian tubes in babies with cleft lip do not drain properly.

Will my child have problems with speech?

When a person speaks, the roof of the mouth directs sound from the vocal cords out through the mouth. If the baby has a cleft palate, sound can be directed into the nose. A child with a cleft can have a nasal sounding voice and be hard to understand. Speech therapy can help your child form sounds that can be understood by others.

Will my child have problems with teeth?

The cleft often causes problems with teeth. Some children may need a bone graft if a part of the bone in the upper jaw is missing. X-rays will help see if your child's teeth are affected. Sometimes teeth may be in the wrong place. As with many children, your child may need **orthodontics** (orth-o-DON-ticks), or braces.

How will my child's cleft be repaired?

Surgery can repair a cleft. The American Cleft Palate-Craniofacial Association (ACPA) recommends a team approach to treat children with clefts. Usually, a team is made up of the following people:

- A craniofacial plastic surgeon, a specialist in facial repair
- An **otolaryngologist** (oh-toe-lar-in-GOLL-oh-jist), an ear, nose and throat specialist
- An **audiologist** (aw-dee-OLL-o-jist), a specialist in hearing
- A pediatric **orthodontist** (or-thoh-DON-tist)
- A pediatric dentist
- A speech therapist
- A social worker
- A registered nurse
- You — the most important member of the team.

The team will work together to plan therapies and surgeries that will promote a happy, healthy life for your baby.

How can I find support and education resources?

It is common to feel overwhelmed with many emotions like confusion, anger or anxiety when you find out your child has a cleft lip or palate. It can help to get support and education about your child's condition.

Most hospitals in large cities have cleft palate-craniofacial teams. Check with your local health

care facility for information. You can reach the American Cleft Palate-Craniofacial Association on the internet at **www.cleftline.org** or by calling 919.933.9044.

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