



Let's Talk

Cleft Lip or Palate



“My daughter Lee was born with a cleft lip and palate. As a baby, she had trouble drinking from a bottle, and milk would come out of her nose. Now she is 3 years old, and her speech sounds like it is coming from her nose.”

—Kim

What Is a Cleft Lip and Palate?

A cleft lip is an opening in the upper lip. The opening can be small or go all the way through the lip to the side of the nose. It can happen on one side of the face or both.

A cleft palate is an opening in the roof of the mouth. A cleft palate can be a small hole or a large opening across the roof of the mouth. Children with a cleft palate may not be able to close off the nose from the mouth when drinking or talking. This is called *velopharyngeal insufficiency*, or VPI.

Clefts happen before birth while the baby is forming. Sometimes clefts run in families. Some clefts occur with other problems. We do not know why some children have clefts.

Most clefts are fixed with surgery. It may take a few operations to fully close the clefts.

Will My Child Have Speech, Language, or Swallowing Problems?

Cleft lips and palates can cause a number of problems. Your child may:

- Have difficulty feeding as a baby because milk may come out of his nose
- Sound like he is speaking out of his nose
- Not say all speech sounds clearly
- Be hard to understand
- Make snorting and grunting noises when he talks
- Use shorter sentences than other children the same age

Fast facts

- A cleft palate can cause speech problems in some children.
- Children with a cleft palate are more likely to get ear infections.
- Speech-language pathologists, or SLPs, can help.

If your child has a cleft lip but not a cleft palate, he may not have any speech problems.

Your child may also have:

- Hearing loss
- Ear infections or fluid behind the eardrum
- Problems with her teeth
- Other learning problems

Speech-Language Pathologists Can Help

Speech-language pathologists, or SLPs, work with children who have speech, language, and swallowing problems. Your SLP can help your child at home, in school, and in the community. The SLP may work with a team to help your child. This team may

include a dentist, a surgeon, a nurse, your child's teacher, and others.

Your child's SLP can:

- Help your baby learn to swallow safely
- Check your child's hearing (The SLP will refer you to a hearing specialist, called an audiologist, if your child has trouble hearing.)
- See if your child has problems talking
- Give you ways to help your child learn to speak better
- Help your doctor determine if your child needs another operation to improve her speech
- Give you ideas about other programs that may help your child, like playgroups or camps

“Lee had surgery to close the clefts in her lip and palate. She works with an SLP and is learning to say words more clearly. I'm glad that she is getting the help she needs.”

—Kim

Cleft lip or palate can cause speech and swallowing problems. Help is available.

To learn more about speech and language development call iTherapy at: (707)651-9915
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