



Cleft Palate and Cleft lips

A cleft palate is caused by a failure of normal development during fetal growth. This results in an interruption in the formation of the structures that form the lips or the roof of the mouth. When the lip is involved, this can be termed a **hare-lip**, and may not interfere with normal development of the puppy or kitten. When the roof of the mouth is involved this is called a **cleft palate**. This is a serious condition which is difficult to treat, and can be life-threatening.

A cleft palate can involve the **hard palate** at the front of the mouth, the **soft palate** at the back of the mouth, or **both**. Right after the puppy or kitten is born the mouth should be checked for normal development. When a cleft is present, milk or food will come out of the nose after eating, or there may be thick nasal discharge and sneezing. Affected pets may have stunted growth, frequent episodes of pneumonia, and require intensive care and monitoring. Even with the best care, pets with a severe cleft palate may not make it to adulthood, due to a combination of malnutrition, recurrent infection, and other genetic problems that can be present at the same time as a cleft.

Patients with cleft palate require a large financial and emotional commitment because of the high level of intensive care, the concurrent risk of infections and malnutrition, and the multiple surgeries that are necessary to repair the defect. For many of these pets, the kind option is to end their suffering through humane euthanasia. Also, because this condition may result from a genetic defect, the parents of the affected puppy or kitten should not be bred.

If we meet a patient who has survived the first 3 months of life we may consider surgical correction of a cleft palate. Surgery is individualized for each patient, and requires advanced surgical knowledge and techniques. Even when treated by very experienced surgeons, some cleft palates still fail to heal after surgery. It is necessary to wait until the puppy or kitten is at least 3 to 4 months of age prior to attempting surgery, because otherwise their rapid growth leads to surgical failure and makes future surgery less likely to be successful.



The dog on the left has a cleft of the hard and soft palate. The dog on the right has a cleft of the nose and lip. We were able to surgically correct both of these clefts, and the patients are doing very well.

