Operation Smile
Changing Lives One Smile at a Time

Frequently Asked Questions about Cleft Lip and Cleft Palate

What is a cleft lip and cleft palate?

Bilateral cleft lip

Unilateral cleft lip

A cleft is an opening in the lip, the roof of the mouth or the soft tissue in the back of the mouth. A cleft lip may be accompanied by an opening in the bones of the upper jaw and/or the upper gum. A cleft palate occurs when the two sides of a palate do not join together, resulting in an opening in the roof of the mouth. A cleft lip and palate can occur on one side or both sides. A child can suffer from a cleft lip, a cleft palate or both.

What causes clefting?

The exact cause is unknown. Cleft lips and cleft palates are congenital defects that occur early in embryonic development. Scientists believe a combination of genetic and environmental factors, such as maternal illness, drugs or malnutrition, may lead to a cleft lip or cleft palate. If one child in a family is born with a cleft, the risk increases by 2 to 4 percent that future children in the family will suffer from the same defect.

How frequently do cleft lips and cleft palates occur?

Cleft lip and/or palate occurs in approximately 1 per 500-700 births, the ratio varying considerably across geographic areas or ethnic groupings. *(World Health Organization International Collaborative Research on Craniofacial Anomalies)*

Does a cleft lip or cleft palate cause problems for a child?

Ear disease and dental problems occur frequently, as do problems with proper speech development. Children who suffer from a cleft lip and/or cleft palate may have difficulty eating. To address these issues, a child and family may work with a team of specialists – a pediatrician, a plastic surgeon, dental specialists, an otolaryngologist (ear, nose and throat specialist), a speech-language pathologist and audiologist, a geneticist and a psychologist/social worker.

Can clefting be prevented?

Scientists are researching methods to prevent cleft lips and cleft palates. One finding, according to research studies, is that mothers who take multivitamins containing folic acid before conception and during the first two months of pregnancy may reduce their risk of giving birth to a baby with a cleft.

Can cleft lips and cleft palates be repaired?

Yes. Surgery provides excellent results. A pediatrician and a plastic surgeon work with a child's parents to choose the best timing for surgery. Most surgeons agree that a cleft lip should be repaired by the time a baby is 3 months old. To repair the partition of mouth and nose as early as possible, a cleft palate generally is repaired between the ages of 12 and 18 months. Any surgical procedure is dependent upon a child's general health and the nature of the cleft lip or cleft palate.

1208

6435 Tidewater Drive ▪ Norfolk, VA 23509 ▪ PHONE 757.321.SMILE (7645) ▪ FAX 757.321.7660
www.operationsmile.org