**Cleft Puppy 101**

**What is a cleft palate, hard and/or soft palate?**

* Cleft Palate - a split in the roof of the mouth
* Hard Palate - the bony front part of the palate
* Soft Palate – the fleshy, flexible part toward the back of the roof of the mouth

**What is a cleft lip, unilateral and bilateral cleft lip?**

* Cleft Lip – a split in the upper lip on one or both sides of the center, often associated with a cleft palate
* Unilateral and Bilateral Cleft Lip - one side of the mouth/nose (unilateral) or both sides (bilateral), and can be complete (meaning the cleft goes up into the nose) or incomplete.

**Clefts are considered midline defects**  – Cleft animals can have one or more of the defects listed and some may not be found immediately.

”Midline field defects includes the 26 symptoms listed below: \* Facial cleft \* Cleft lip \* Cleft palate \* Heart murmur \* Septal defect \* Ventricular defect \* Congenital heart defect \* Hypospadias \* Hydrocephalus \* Anencephaly \* Abnormal kidney development \* Spina bifida \* Meningocele \* Meningomyelocele \* Encephalocele \* Congenital skin dimple in back \* Omphalocele \* Esophageal atresia \* Abnormal opening between trachea and esophagus \* Imperforate anus \* Conotruncal heart defects \* Diaphragmantic hernia \* Mouth cleft \* Tongue cleft \* Cleft nose \* Low birth weight” <http://www.checkorphan.org/diseases/midline-field-defects>

**What you need to know  .…..**

* They live wonderful, full lives and will change your life!  They are worth saving!
* I truly believe they are here for a very important reason. Maybe because you need the love they give, or the smile they put on your face or that cleft child that thought he was so different and alone but now sees your puppy and all of a sudden thinks his cleft is cool.  We may never know the true depth of their purpose, but I am 100% convinced they are here for a reason!
* Hand raised from birth and SPOILED rotten!  Most human like puppy that will ever own you.  Loving little snugglers that grab your heart, and have you fall madly, permanently in love with them!
* There is no momma dog and not many, if any, puppy siblings so they lack dog discipline.  The mother dog does discipline her babies even if we do not see it or understand it.  Sibling puppies play, growl, fight and teach each other how to get along.  Cleft puppies often have that only child syndrome going on. That does not mean they don’t get along with other dogs; we have a house full of dogs and they all get along BUT I have found our older dogs are not any better disciplinarians than we are.  Everyone here is a professional baby spoiler! Establish who is in charge right away and stay consistent with them.
* We have had issues with the oral Bordetella (kennel cough) vaccine.  A few of our cleft puppies actually got kennel cough approximately 1 week after receiving the oral vaccine.  (We no longer give it before they leave our house).  If you choose to get the Bordetella vaccine I would suggest trying another form of it or possibly waiting until they are a bit older.
* If they get their cleft impacted or a foreign object up there that you cannot get out, it will cost you to have it removed.
* An increased risk to sinus infections with a possibility of lung aspiration (less likely after eating on its own) They are more prone to sinus infections because there is a hole in the roof of their mouth straight into their sinuses.  I find the clefts I have had are less likely to get sinus infections the older they get because they do adjust and learn to self-clean.  However, there is a hole in the roof of their mouth, so the potential is always there.
* Potential for palate surgery.  Cleft palate surgery is expensive and if necessary, you must be prepared for that.  Before making a decision on surgery I strongly recommend multiple opinions.  I have asked professors and my veterinarians how much time is spent learning about clefts in medical school and the answer is always the same – little to none!  Even most veterinary dental and orthodontic surgeons see very few cleft cases so please make sure you are comfortable with what is being advised.  Ask questions about experience, success rate etc…  Make sure to join the cleft group on facebook and ask questions!!!!  There is more experience and knowledge in that group then you can find ANYWHERE else.  The vets I work with have the same opinion as I do….. we don’t fix something if there are not chronic problems and cleft surgery is definitely not an option until full grown unless life altering problems are occurring.  Our very trusted vet at NC State (the one who helped us save Graci back in 2006) says, “don’t fix it if it isn’t broken”.  I am told doing surgery at a young age increases the likelihood of needing multiple surgeries.  The very experienced rescuers will tell you a very large percentage of clefts do not require surgery.
* Potential for nose surgery if you adopt a cleft lip puppy.  Cleft lips often alter the dogs breathing in one or both of the “nostril(s)”.  I use quotes because often the cleft lip deforms the nostril(s).  I suggest ALL adopters of cleft lip puppies have their puppy’s nostrils evaluated periodically as they grow.  When you choose a vet to do the spay/neuter for your pet please make sure that vet is capable of doing laser surgery on the nose if necessary.  While your pet is under anesthesia for the spay/neuter it’s a perfect time to have their nose evaluated closely and lasered if necessary.  The laser procedure opens a hole for better breathing.  Many normal dogs need this procedure also, so this is a surgery many vets have experience with.  Please have your vet call our vet, Dr Uehlein of The Veterinary Hospital of Davidson, if they have questions about how the procedure differs for clefts.
* Cleft lip puppies may require tooth/teeth extraction near their cleft.  Sometimes because of their deformity the teeth will turn and face each other.  This should be monitored as the puppy grows to ensure the teeth do not grow into their gums.
* Especially as puppies, you may have to help them clean out their cleft. (Instructions below) Typically these cleanings get less and less as they adjust to their clefts and learn how to clean them on their own.
* They sneeze more than other dogs and may sometimes gag, cough or make choking sounds.  For all dogs not just clefts…. as long as a dog is making noise keep your fingers out of their mouths and allow them to work it out on their own.  You can push something deeper into their throat and kill them.  Only intervene if they can no longer make a sound and are unable to breath.  I always suggest a dog CPR class but if you cannot do that please watch reputable YouTube videos on how to help your dog.

Cleft puppies normally adapt very well to their deformity.  When they first begin to eat on their own many things end up in the cleft.  As puppies when everything goes into the mouth it also has the potential to get stuck in the cleft. Sometimes things get packed in there too.  I use Qtips and/or a syringe with warm water to help clean out anything that is stuck in there. I treat the syringe as a toy when the puppies are young so I can more easily get it in their mouths when necessary.  Just allow them to chew on the syringe a bit and angle it upward in the mouth and gently spray the water up toward the cleft.  This will help flush out anything that may be impacted.  You can also give squirts of water from the syringe into the nostrils, but someone will probably have to hold the puppy while you do this.  If something is packed in the cleft you can try and loosen it yourself or take the puppy to the vet to have it sedated to be cleaned.  We go to a holistic vet and always try to avoid sedation if possible.  If the things above haven’t worked, we will try to wrap the puppy in a towel to avoid injury to them or us due to struggling; one person will hold the puppy and help open the mouth and the other will have QTips ready.  I might suggest having a rolled-up piece of cloth or a toy between your fingers and their teeth.  Whoever is doing the cleaning will have to be fast and gentle.  Your goal is to loosen the debris and not necessarily get it all out.  Once the debris is loose, go back to flushing it with the warm water syringe.  There is a risk of a bloody nose if the qtip slips too far into the cleft.  Do NOT panic.  This has happened twice to me and yes, it's upsetting but I take a paper towel or cloth and hold it firmly against just the roof of the mouth.  This has worked to stop the bleeding quickly.  Again, attempting this is your choice and will depend on how comfortable you are with trying it.  Your vet can attempt it also or sedate the puppy and do a thorough cleaning.  Example… Miss Emma Grace decided to chew on a stick which ended up getting wedged in her cleft and her momma had no other choice but to have the vet remove that 3-inch-long stick! lol

I realize some of this sounds scary and it can be but I am giving you all the potential problems so you can make an informed decision.  Of course, there are probably things I’m forgetting but I’m only a phone call away and will be here to support you throughout this baby’s life.  These are my “babies” and will ALWAYS have a special place in my heart.

**Suggestions for care…..**

* Elevated dog bowls
* Size of the kibble matters!  Choose a dog food with a larger kibble; this will help to keep it out of the cleft.  If you want to add yogurt, pumpkin, canned dog food or something like that to the food, you can but… it MUST be stirred completely to coat the food, not globs of it that could go straight into the cleft.  Do not feed mushy foods, this will pack into the cleft in seconds and it won’t be pretty.  Use common sense when giving clefts treats, food etc… Example…peanut butter is too sticky for cleft dogs, but I find they can handle pieces of cream cheese.  I use it to hide pills in; just form a ball of cream cheese around the pill.
* Treats - I use yogurt dots (human baby yogurt dots) as treats because they disintegrate should they make their way into the cleft and the dogs LOVE them and I love them too.  “Two for me and one for you” You can find them in the baby aisle of any store.
* All of our puppies are on a probiotic and an immune support supplement because they were unable to nurse from their mother. Consult your vet for the recommended length of time to keep your puppy on these.
* Water bottle (rabbit) **ONLY** if the puppy hasn’t been switched to bowl drinking yet.  We do recommend switching to bowl drinking and usually begin that process around 7 weeks old.  Most puppies leave our home using only a water bowl.
* Examine cleft periodically after eating.  If you do see something in the cleft and it doesn’t seem to be bothering the puppy you may want to just observe and see if they can get it out on their own. If your puppy has a stinky nose you will need to assist in cleaning the cleft.   If necessary, try to loosen with QTip or flush nostrils and cleft with warm water.  Carefully, to avoid aspiration.
* Puppies love to put everything in their mouth so be sure to watch them! Whatever enters their mouth has the potential to get into their cleft.
* We recommend using a harness instead of a collar for walking. This is important especially if the puppy/dog has a cleft palate, hard and soft palate involved.  You probably won’t be able to see how far the cleft goes into the throat so it’s a good idea to avoid any pressure being placed on the throat.  Collars can be worn as jewelry 😊

**If your cleft puppy/dog ever needs any kind of surgery (please share with your vet)**

* Run blood work prior
* Make sure the dog is intubated with an inflatable cuff
* Leave the tube in until they are chewing on it.  (Recover like a bulldog – no matter the breed)
* No Acepromazine for boxers per the American Boxer Club.  You may want to question the use of Acepromazine in any of the brachycephalic (smush) faced breeds; we lost a bulldog to this drug. Visit the website and print a copy of the warning for your vet   <https://www.americanboxerclub.org/ace_boxers.html>

Please consider joining [**Cleft Palate and Cleft Lip Pups Help and Rescue**](https://www.facebook.com/groups/cleftpalatecleftliphelp/?ref=group_header)Facebook Group. They will help you, just ask.  Some of the most experienced cleft rescuers in the country are in that group ready to help.

**Suggested Groups and Pages to get you started**

* Cleft Palate and Cleft Lip Pups Help and Rescue <https://www.facebook.com/groups/cleftpalatecleftliphelp/> – Facebook
* Save The Clefts Rescue <https://www.facebook.com/savetheclefts> – Facebook
* @savetheclefts – Instagram