

Canine Cleft Palate

A cleft palate is an abnormal opening in the roof of the mouth. It is the result of failure of the two sides of the palate (roof of the mouth) to come together and fuse during *embryonic* development. A cleft palate results in an opening between the nasal passages and the mouth.

Symptoms and Types

Symptoms expected with a cleft palate include:

- Runny nose
- Coughing
- Aspiration pneumonia (pneumonia caused by milk and food contents entering the cleft and infecting the lungs)
- Respiratory difficulty (caused by aspiration pneumonia)
- Difficulty sucking and nursing (for puppies)
- Slow growth
- Weight loss
- Lack of appetite

Causes

Cleft palate is most often a congenital disorder, likely inherited. There is a breed predilection in beagles, Cocker spaniels, dachshunds, German shepherds, Labrador retrievers, schnauzers, Shetland sheepdogs, and *brachycephalic* (short-nosed) breeds.

Cleft palates can also be caused by exposure of pregnant female dogs to *teratogenic* chemicals (chemicals which interfere with normal *embryo* development.) These include griseofulvicin and excessive vitamin A and vitamin D. In these cases, the puppies may be born with cleft palates.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis is made by a visual examination of the cleft palate.

Treatment

Treatment is surgical repair of the defect. Surgical correction is usually postponed until 3-4 months of age, if possible. More than one surgery is often necessary for complete closure of the opening in the palate.

Living and Management

Puppies with cleft palates should be fed with a long nipple which brings food into the *oropharynx* (the part of the mouth behind the palate but in front of the voice box), or with a feeding tube inserted into the stomach until the defect can be surgically repaired.