

ASK The DOCTOR!

Q: Can a cleft lip be seen using ultrasound? What are the ways to “fix” it, and is it caused by malnutrition during pregnancy?

Answer provided by Dr. Tan Eng Kien (MRCOG UK), a consultant OBGYN at NUH. His special interests include OBGYN ultrasound imaging, high-risk obstetrics and fetal medicine.

A: Cleft lip is a defect of the development of the baby’s lip, resulting in a gap on the baby’s upper lip. It may involve just the lip on its own, or it may involve the palate (the roof of the baby’s mouth) as well.

Fetal anomaly scan at 18-22 weeks identifies 75-80% of cleft lips. Cleft palate on its own, involving only the roof of the mouth and not the lips, is much harder to detect on ultrasound.

Cleft lip is a relatively common fetal anomaly and occurs in 1 in 700 births. The exact cause of how the condition occurred is unknown, but it may run in families. If both parents are unaffected, but have one child with a cleft, the chance

of the second child being similarly affected is 2 – 8%. If one or other parent has a cleft, the risk of cleft in a child is 4 – 6% with each pregnancy. Some facial clefts may be associated with genetic syndromes and chromosomal abnormalities. Chromosomes are tiny thread like structures in cells of human body, carrying our genes and responsible for how our body functions. If a cleft lip / palate is detected on ultrasound, your doctor may advise an amniocentesis, a procedure performed after 16 weeks gestation and involved taking a sample of the baby’s amniotic fluid for chromosomes analysis. Amniocentesis is performed with a fine needle under ultrasound guidance.

If the cleft occurs on its own without any other genetic and structural problems, the prognosis is excellent. Staged plastic surgical correction is offered after the baby is born. Prior to surgery, the newborn may experience some difficulty with feeding, but this is usually remedied with a specially designed artificial palate.

Some research has shown that smoking and alcohol may be associated with facial clefts. There is also a study showing that folic acid may prevent some of these facial clefts. Therefore, stop smoking and alcohol before getting pregnant, and consume folic acid supplements which are also important to prevent spinal defects (eg spina bifida).

