



University Hospitals Bristol **NHS**

NHS Foundation Trust

Patient information service  
**Cleft information**

# Buccal flap operation



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This leaflet aims to give an overview of the buccal flap operation.

## **Why is this operation required?**

Some people with a cleft palate find that, even after repair of the cleft, their soft palate is not quite long enough to close off the nose from the throat. This can cause air to escape through the nose during speech, resulting in 'nasal' sounding speech. It can also cause food to get into the nose during swallowing.

People with these symptoms need to have their soft palates lengthened a little to allow a good seal to be created. A buccal flap operation is one way of doing this. It may be done alone, or at the same time as a repair of the muscles (see separate leaflets for further information).

## **What happens during the operation?**

A buccal flap operation is an operation which is done inside the mouth; there is no surgery to the outside of the face.

A small cut ('incision') is made in the soft palate to make a gap in the roof of the mouth, between the hard palate (at the front) and the soft palate (at the back).

A finger-like piece of skin ('flap') from the inside of the cheek ('buccal mucosa') is lifted up and turned around so that it fills the gap which has just been made. The flap is still attached to the cheek on one edge in order to keep its blood supply.

The inside of the cheek, where the flap is taken from, is closed with small stitches. This heals quickly, but there may be some swelling to the side of the face for a week or so. You may feel like you have a lump in the back of your throat; this should settle after a couple of days.

Sometimes the bottom of the flap, which is still attached to its blood supply, can stick out a bit and get in the way when chewing food. This may require another small operation a few months later to trim the excess skin.

## **What are the risks of this operation?**

As with all operations, there is a small risk of bleeding and infection following the surgery. Common signs of wound infection are listed on page 6.

Please speak to your doctor if you would like to discuss these risks further.

## **What will happen if this operation doesn't take place?**

If you or your child don't have surgery, your symptoms are unlikely to improve. The impact of these symptoms varies greatly, and therefore the decision of whether or not to have the surgery is very personal. A member of the cleft team would be happy to discuss the options with you.

## **How long will the operation last and what pain relief will I/my child require?**

The operation will last around two hours but it may take longer. It will be carried out while you are asleep (under general anaesthetic). After the operation, pain relief will be given as required so that you are not in any pain.

## **Where will the operation take place and how will I find out the operation date?**

For children, the operation will usually take place at Bristol Royal Hospital for Children. For adults, the cleft team will confirm where the operation will take place. You will be posted a letter confirming the date of the operation, and this will include further information on preparing for your admission.

## **How long will I/my child need to stay in hospital?**

You will come into hospital on the morning of the operation. You will usually need to stay in hospital overnight and go home the next day.

The parent/carer of a child having the operation will be able to stay with their child while they are in hospital.

# After the operation

## Will I notice a difference in speech straight away?

There will be swelling inside the mouth for a few weeks after the operation, so it is best not to make judgements about speech during this time. Some people notice improvements straightaway, but for others this does not happen until several months after the operation. Although the operation aims to improve speech, we cannot guarantee this.

## Diet, mouth care and pain relief

You or your child should:

- continue with a soft diet for two to four weeks (for example potatoes, vegetables, baked beans, spaghetti, very soft meat or fish). You can add extra gravy or milk to soften food
- avoid foods that may stick to the palate (for example chocolate, bread, jam and yoghurt with pips)
- avoid hard foods that could cause pain or damage to the palate (for example crisps, chips, apples)
- not use a straw
- continue to rinse the mouth with water, or have a drink after food, to keep the site of the palate repair clean
- brush the teeth as normal, and if you use mouthwash, continue as normal
- continue to use painkillers if required.

## **Infection**

If there is a wound infection, this may need a course of antibiotics.

Signs to look out for are:

- feeling unwell
- a high temperature
- vomiting and loose stools
- a mucky wound.

If you are concerned, please contact your local GP or the cleft team.

## **Stitches**

All stitches are dissolvable, so they do not require removal. They may take several weeks to dissolve.

## **School, work and sports**

We advise:

- at least 10 to 14 days off school or work
- avoiding contact sports or swimming for three to four weeks.

## **Follow-up**

A follow-up appointment with your local cleft team will be arranged for approximately three months after the operation to ensure the palate is healing. If speech and language therapy was being received before the operation, the speech and language therapist can advise you when it is appropriate for this to start again. An appointment to reassess speech will be arranged for approximately six months after the operation.



**South West Cleft Service**  
**0117 342 1177**  
**Website: [www.uhbristol.nhs.uk/cleft](http://www.uhbristol.nhs.uk/cleft)**

As well as providing clinical care, our Trust has an important role in research. This allows us to discover new and improved ways of treating patients.

While you are under our care, you may be approached about taking part in research. To find out more please visit:  
**[www.uhbristol.nhs.uk/research-innovation](http://www.uhbristol.nhs.uk/research-innovation)**  
or call the research and innovation team on  
**0117 342 0233.**

For access to other patient leaflets and information please go to the following address:

**[www.uhbristol.nhs.uk/patients-and-visitors/information-for-patients/](http://www.uhbristol.nhs.uk/patients-and-visitors/information-for-patients/)**

**Hospital switchboard: 0117 923 0000**



**Minicom: 0117 934 9869**



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For an interpreter or signer please contact the telephone number on your appointment letter.



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