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Cleft Palate

Description: The palate (roof of the mouth) separates the nasal and oral cavities. It has two parts: the hard and soft palate. The hard palate in the anterior (front) part of the mouth is formed by two bony plates, one on each side, that normally fuse at the midline during fetal life. The soft palate at the caudal portion (rear) of the mouth is basically muscle. Both palates are covered by a mucous membrane. The cleft palate of the type seen in Westies is formed when the two bony plates of the hard palate fail to fuse normally in the fetus. This failure of fusion leaves a hole or slit in the roof of the mouth, allowing communication between the nasal and oral cavities. The slit can vary in both length and width from a very small hole to a cleft that involves nearly the entire roof of the mouth. Portions of the soft palate may or may not be involved, and a cleft lip can occasionally occur with the cleft palate.

Age of Onset: The disorder is present at birth.

Diagnosis: The diagnosis can usually be made by simply observing the roof of the mouth after the animal is born. Diagnosis is often made when milk is seen running from a puppy's nose while it is nursing. On occasion, with a very small cleft, a radiograph may be helpful.

Treatment: The only treatment is surgical closure of the cleft by covering the hole with tissue from the surrounding mucous membrane. This difficult procedure is not generally recommended except in experimental situations.

Mode of Inheritance: Breeding studies in Westies have shown that the trait is polygenic: i.e. it does not have a single-gene mode of inheritance.

It is recognized that at least 22 teratogenic agents can cause cleft palate in dogs. These agents affect the in utero environment of the fetus, but nearly all of them are experimental agents and are not generally available to dogs. Cleft palates in Westies should be considered to be genetic unless proven to be otherwise. Cleft palate has been observed in nearly all breeds of dogs.

Important notice: Any dog that has undergone surgical correction of a cleft palate is ineligible to be exhibited in conformation competition at an American Kennel Club (AKC) dog show.

*****Disclaimer*****

Any information contained on this site relating to various medical, health, and fitness conditions of Westies and their treatment is for informational purposes only and is not meant to be a substitute for the advice provided by your own veterinarian. You should not use the information contained herein for diagnosing a Westie's health - you should always consult your own veterinarian.

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