SYMPTOM

Short philtrum

A short philtrum is a shorter-than-expected space between the nose and upper lip.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Usually feels no different from the rest of your face

WHERE IT IS FELT
Groove between the nose and upper lip

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Family traits, normal facial variation, age-related facial proportions

WHEN IT IS URGENT
A baby suddenly cannot feed normally

USUALLY LASTS
Often lifelong; appearance changes as the face grows

SEE A DOCTOR IF
New change, feeding problems, or other unusual features

Overview

The philtrum is the vertical groove between the base of the nose and the middle of the upper lip. A short philtrum means this distance appears or measures shorter than expected for someone's age and facial proportions.

This is a physical feature rather than an illness. It usually causes no pain or other sensation. Many people naturally have a shorter philtrum because of inherited family traits or ordinary differences in facial shape.

In some children, a short philtrum appears alongside differences in growth, development, or other parts of the face and body. In that situation, it can be one clue among many, but it does not identify a particular condition by itself.

What it may feel or look like

A short philtrum usually feels completely normal. You may notice that:

A visual impression is not always the same as a medically short measurement. Nose shape, upper-lip shape, dental position, camera angle, and facial expression can all affect how long the

philtrum looks.

In children, facial proportions change as the head and face grow. A feature that looks noticeable in infancy may become less obvious later.

- The nose and upper lip look close together
- The upper lip appears slightly raised or prominent
- The feature is shared by relatives
- It becomes more or less noticeable with facial expressions

Common causes

Normal facial variation is the most common explanation. Faces differ naturally, and philtrum length is only one part of overall facial structure.

Family traits may also explain it. A child may have a philtrum similar to that of a parent or sibling without having a health problem.

Age and facial proportions affect appearance. The distance between the nose and lip generally changes during growth, so it should be considered in relation to age and overall facial size.

Less commonly, a short philtrum can be part of a genetic or chromosome-related condition. This is more likely to be considered when there are other findings, such as unusual growth, delayed development, learning difficulties, differences present from birth, or several distinctive facial features. A short philtrum alone is not enough to suggest or confirm such a condition.

Scarring, facial injury, surgery, dental changes, or swelling can sometimes make the area look shorter. These causes are more relevant when the appearance has changed rather than always being present.

There is usually no urgent cause when a short philtrum is an isolated, lifelong feature.

When to seek medical care

A short philtrum by itself does not usually require urgent care. You can arrange a routine appointment if:

Seek same-day medical advice if a baby suddenly cannot feed normally, repeatedly chokes during feeds, or is taking much less milk than usual.

Call emergency services if there is serious trouble breathing, blue or grey lips, sudden facial

weakness, or swelling of the lips or tongue. These symptoms are not caused by philtrum length, but they need immediate assessment.

- The appearance is new or has changed noticeably
- A baby has difficulty attaching to the breast or bottle
- Eating, speech, dental development, or lip movement is affected
- A child has concerns about growth, learning, or development
- There are several unusual physical features
- You want help understanding whether the measurement is within the expected range

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will usually begin by asking whether the feature has always been present and whether relatives have a similar facial shape. For a child, they may ask about pregnancy, birth, feeding, growth, development, hearing, speech, and learning.

The face and mouth may be examined as a whole. Philtrum length can be measured from the base of the nose to the border of the upper lip and compared with suitable reference measurements. Age, facial size, and population background can affect interpretation.

The examination may also include the palate, teeth, jaw, nose, ears, hands, and other physical features. Height, weight, and head size may be checked in children.

Most people with an isolated short philtrum do not need tests. If there are additional concerns, referral to a paediatrician, clinical geneticist, speech and language professional, dentist, or another specialist may be appropriate. Genetic testing may be offered when the overall medical and developmental pattern suggests it could provide useful information.

Treatment and self-care

An isolated short philtrum does not need medical treatment. There is no exercise, massage, or skin product proven to lengthen the underlying area.

If feeding, speech, dental alignment, or lip movement is affected, care focuses on that specific problem rather than the philtrum measurement. This might involve feeding support, speech and language assessment, dental care, or treatment of a scar.

If appearance is causing distress, especially for a child or teenager, supportive discussion can help. Cosmetic procedures can change the relationship between the nose and upper lip, but

they also carry risks and may not be suitable while the face is still growing. A qualified specialist can explain realistic outcomes and alternatives.

What to expect

When a short philtrum is a natural or inherited feature, it is generally lifelong and harmless. Its appearance may change as the face grows, the teeth develop, or the surrounding soft tissues change with age.

If it is one part of a broader condition, the outlook depends on that condition and any associated health or developmental needs. The philtrum itself rarely causes problems.

Common questions

Is a short philtrum a birth defect?

Not necessarily. It is often a normal facial feature present from birth. The term describes appearance or measurement and does not explain the cause.

Can I measure it at home?

You can estimate the distance, but home measurement may be misleading. Small differences in head position or where the measurement begins and ends can change the result. Interpretation also requires age-appropriate reference information.

Does it mean a child has a genetic condition?

No. Many healthy children and adults have a short-looking philtrum. Genetic assessment is usually considered only when other medical, developmental, growth, or physical findings are present.

Can the philtrum suddenly become shorter?

The underlying distance is unlikely to shorten suddenly. Swelling, injury, scarring, dental changes, or altered facial movement may change how it looks. A new change should be discussed at a routine appointment unless it comes with urgent symptoms.

Will it affect feeding or speech?

Philtrum length alone usually does not. Feeding or speech problems may result from separate differences involving the lips, mouth, palate, muscles, or coordination and should be assessed on their own.

Sources

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