

# Gingivitis

Craig G. Ruaux, BVSc, PhD, DACVIM (Small Animal)

## BASIC INFORMATION

### Description

The gingiva is the part of the gums that surrounds the teeth where they arise from the jaw. Gingivitis is inflammation of this area. Gingivitis is a component of *periodontal disease*, which is the most common dental disease of dogs and cats.

Because the gingiva lies in close proximity to the teeth and helps maintain the health of the tooth sockets, long-standing and severe gingivitis can increase the risk that teeth will be lost. When the gingiva is inflamed, it often recedes from the tooth, revealing the tooth roots.

### Causes

The major cause of gingivitis in animals is accumulation of scale (plaque) and tartar on the base of the teeth. In cats, some viral infections (herpesvirus, calicivirus, feline immunodeficiency virus) are associated with gingivitis. Other medical conditions, particularly kidney disease or kidney failure, can lead to the formation of ulcers on the gum line and secondary gingivitis. Chemical irritants (such as cleaning products or caustic compounds) can also cause inflammation of the gums and gingiva.

### Clinical Signs

In many animals, there are no obvious signs of gingivitis, and the condition may be noticed only when your veterinarian is doing an oral examination on your pet. Some cats with severe gingivitis have a loss of appetite, show pain on opening of the mouth, or have bleeding from the gums. (See the handout on **Lymphoplasmacytic Stomatitis in Cats**.) The gingiva are usually bright red and swollen. Gingivitis is often associated with heavy scale and tartar accumulation (brown to gray material caked on and around the teeth). Occasionally, a foul odor may be noticed in the mouth.

### Diagnostic Tests

Gingivitis is usually diagnosed simply by observing redness and swelling of the gum margin, particularly when scale and

tartar are present. Some animals develop a proliferative gingivitis, and the gingiva becomes dramatically swollen. This proliferation can look like a tumor or epulis (see the handout on **Epulis in Dogs**) and may require biopsy of the tissue to determine the nature of the condition. In affected cats, assays for the common viral diseases may be recommended. If serious periodontal disease is suspected, dental x-rays may be recommended.

## TREATMENT AND FOLLOW-UP

### Treatment Options

The main treatment for gingivitis that is associated with scale and tartar is to clean and polish the teeth with the animal under general anesthesia. Once the tartar and scale are removed, gingivitis can be reduced or prevented through a program of routine teeth cleaning. Your veterinarian will discuss teeth cleaning options and preventive care with you.

Cats with severe gingivitis associated with viral infections often need extractions of affected teeth to control the inflammation. Antibiotics may be started in some cases to decrease the bacteria present in the mouth, often prior to dental cleaning.

### Follow-up Care

Most animals recover fully following dental cleaning or extraction procedures. Antibiotics may be continued postoperatively. Your veterinarian will outline a follow-up program to help monitor dental health and ensure that gingivitis does not recur.

### Prognosis

Gingivitis is usually reversible. Prognosis for animals with gingivitis is good to excellent, assuming that an effective maintenance program of teeth cleaning is continued that prevents accumulation of scale and tartar.