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Feline Chronic Gingivostomatitis

Feline gingivostomatitis describes inflammation of the mouth (the gums and/or the angles of the mouth). Sometimes oral inflammation has an obvious cause – such as eating corrosive material, or persistent vomiting. However, a large number of cats present to us with severe gingivitis and stomatitis with no clear cause. The condition is very painful and may cause affected cats to stop eating altogether. Unfortunately, the condition can be very frustrating to treat and manage.

Clinical signs of a cat with gingivostomatitis

Cats with gingivostomatitis often stop eating suddenly and without warning. They will often approach food or pester to be fed, but when the food is placed in front of them, they do not want to eat. Some cats will even run away from the food bowl. If these cats do try to eat, they often chew their food awkwardly, dribbling and dropping little pieces. Occasionally a hungry cat will swallow large chunks of food without chewing (this can lead to tummy upsets).

Diagnosis of gingivostomatitis

Gingivitis and stomatitis are easily diagnosed visually – your vet will be able to see red, inflamed gums and oral mucosa as soon as he or she opens your cat's mouth. There is often an unpleasant smell associated with the mouth; this is due to



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bacterial infection taking advantage of the inflamed mouth surfaces.

Causes of gingivostomatitis

The exact cause of feline chronic gingivostomatitis has not been proven. However, veterinary experts believe that it is probably caused by a combination of infection with the feline calicivirus, and an abnormality of the immune response within the mouth. A reaction to food may also be involved.

Investigation of gingivostomatitis

If your vet observes gingivostomatitis when examining your cat the following points will be considered:

- Your vet will discuss your cat's lifestyle, diet and history with you
- A careful oral examination must be performed. This examination is necessary to determine the extent and severity of the gingivitis and stomatitis, and to look carefully for any dental problems that may be aggravating the condition.
- A swab should be performed to look for calicivirus infection
- If there are no obvious signs of dental problems or concurrent disease, a blood test to rule out FIV/FelV infection would be the next logical step, particularly in cats that are at higher risk of these infections (e.g. un-neutered cats, cats involved in frequent fights, cats that were rescued as stray cats).



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Treatment

Chronic gingivostomatitis can be extremely difficult to treat. It is not acceptable to leave these cats without treatment as the condition is very painful and many cats will not eat at all unless they are given some relief. Medical treatment is usually successful at controlling the problem for these cats, but it is sometimes not possible to achieve an outright cure. The following measures may be indicated:

- **Antibiotics** – Courses of antibiotics can be very effective at reducing the number of bacteria in the mouth. Although these bacteria are not the sole cause of the problem, their presence often aggravates the condition. The most common antibiotic to be used in this way is Clindamycin.

- **Anti-inflammatory therapy** – Anti-inflammatory drugs are prescribed to reduce redness or soreness in the mouth. There are two main types of anti-inflammatory, these are:
 - o **CORTICOSTEROIDS** – Corticosteroids can be given as daily tablets or as an injection that lasts approximately four weeks. Steroids also have the beneficial side effect of stimulating appetite. However, prolonged use of steroids can cause side effects (for example, in rare cases they can lead to the development of diabetes). In cases of gingivostomatitis caused by calicivirus they may also encourage growth of the virus and so make the problem worse so they are now not recommended.

- **Non steroidal anti-inflammatories** – Metacam is an anti-inflammatory that is generally believed to be safe and is



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widely used in these cases. It is in a liquid form and is administered in the food or directly into the mouth. Current advice from veterinary surgeons researching treatments for feline gingivostomatitis is to use Metacam rather than corticosteroids.

- **Dental care** – Any tartar or bacteria on the teeth will aggravate the mouth inflammation, even if they are not the primary cause. If your cat needs dental treatment under anaesthetic this should be carried out. Once the teeth are free from tartar and disease, regular treatment at home with an enzymatic “toothpaste” such as Logic is recommended. In more severe cases, removal of all molar teeth (even if they are healthy) is recommended. This prevents food, plaque and bacteria from hiding at the margin between the tooth and the gum and aggravating the gums. Research suggests that 80% of cats with gingivostomatitis will improve significantly if all their teeth are removed.

- **Diet** – Choose the diet that your cat eats most easily (this is usually a tinned diet). A hypoallergenic diet such as Hills z/d or Purina HA is recommended just in case there is any allergic component to the oral inflammation, however it is most important that your cat enjoys the food that he/she eats.

- **Stress** – In some cats, stress is thought to play a part in triggering flare-ups of their gingivostomatitis. Removing stressors, or allowing your cat a “safe” place to escape from visitors, children or other cats etc may help in these cases. “Feliway” is a



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pheromone product available from your vet which is designed to reduce feline anxiety. It can be purchased as a plug in diffuser which is effective throughout the house, or as a spray for particular areas or situations (e.g. travel baskets, car journeys etc).

- **Probiotics** - There are studies to suggest that cats with chronic viral infections suffer from fewer flare-ups of gingivostomatitis, and eye/nose inflammation if they take the Purina FortiFlora supplement on a permanent basis.

Prognosis

It has been reported that 80% of cats with gingivostomatitis will be cured or significantly improved by extraction of all teeth, in combination with the other measures highlighted above. However, not all of the treatments are suitable for use in all cats. There are also some cases that do not respond fully even when the correct treatments are carried out. Therefore, some cats require permanent or repeated medication to keep the condition under control.

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