

DEFINITION

1. Gingivitis is an inflammatory condition of the gingiva (gums).
2. Chronic gingival inflammation may persist for many years and breakdown of the periodontal membrane, with loss of the supporting bone, may follow and increase in severity over the years. This is referred to as periodontitis or "pyorrhoea".

CLINICAL MANIFESTATIONS

3. The symptoms are usually so mild that they are unnoticed by the patient. If symptoms are present, they include discomfort from the teeth, bleeding of the gums, difficulty in eating, looseness of the teeth and abscess formation.
4. A mild inflammation of the gums and slight destruction of the collagen fibres of the periodontal membrane are found in most adults.
5. Advanced destruction of the periodontal membrane, including the supporting bone, is found in about half of the middle aged or older population.
6. A very rare type of rapid destruction of the supporting dental tissues is found in children or young adults and is referred to as juvenile periodontitis. In this condition one or more teeth may become mobile and may be lost before the age of 21 years.
7. Periodontitis is the most important cause of loss of teeth after the age of 40, when the incidence of dental caries has greatly diminished. An important feature of periodontitis is that it affects many, and often all, the teeth, resulting in complete loss of all the dentition.

AETIOLOGY

8. Gingivitis is caused by dental plaque, and both Gram-positive and negative organisms are involved. *Actinomyces viscosus*, *Bacteroides asaccharolyticus* and other anaerobes seem to be of particular significance. The organisms do not penetrate the gingival epithelium, and damage is thought to be caused by toxic and antigenic products, particularly endotoxins from the Gram-negative organisms.
9. Dental plaque may calcify, especially in adults and the elderly, to produce calculus. This is often found above the gingival margin, especially on the lingual surface of the lower incisors and the buccal surface of the upper molars (ie. opposite the orifices of the major salivary glands).
10. Dental plaque is the primary cause of gingivitis and, if not removed, some of it becomes calcified. The resulting calculus may exacerbate the gingivitis.

CONCLUSION

11. Gingivitis is an inflammatory condition of the gums which may lead to periodontitis. It is caused by dental plaque due to bacterial action.

REFERENCE

Lehner T. The Mouth and Salivary Glands - Gingival and periodontal disease. In: (Eds) Weatherall D J, Ledingham J G G and Warrell D A. Oxford Textbook of Medicine. Oxford. Oxford University Press. 2nd Ed. 1987. p12.24.

December 1992