

Question: My dog is about 7 months old and appears to have a new growth in his mouth, near the lip. It isn't that big but you can easily see it.. Do I need to have him seen by a veterinarian? What do you think it is?

Answer: The mass you are describing in your dog's mouth sounds like a papilloma, a benign tumor of the skin and mouth that is caused by a papilloma virus. These are usually seen in young dogs between the ages of 6 months and 4 years or adult dogs that are not healthy. This condition is contagious to other dogs through direct contact with the mouth or through fomites, objects that can carry the virus. If your dog plays ball in public places around other dogs, the ball could carry the virus from him to another dog. Once your dog comes in contact with the virus, there may be 1-8 weeks before any growths are seen.

A growth seen in the mouth is often the first sign of the virus. Some owners may say the dog has a hard time swallowing, starts drooling or has bad breath. The papilloma virus is host specific, meaning this form of the virus will not affect you or a cat. Since these growths can resemble other cancerous masses in the mouth, your veterinarian may recommend a biopsy of the mass to get a definitive diagnosis. Some veterinarians may feel comfortable making the diagnosis based on exposure, age and the appearance of the growth.

These growths typically regress within 1-5 months of first appearing although some may persist for 24 months or more. Since regression is common and occurs quickly, there is usually no treatment required. Surgical removal is recommended if the growth is obstructing normal oral function. For this reason, pets that aren't eating or have an infection from the mass may need to have them removed. Certain antiviral therapy may be recommended on a case-by-case basis.

While it sounds like your dog may have a growth that is the result of a virus, you should have him seen by a veterinarian. It is important to rule out other aggressive cancers that can be seen in the mouth and also determine if the mass is interfering with his daily routine. If the mass is a papilloma, take comfort knowing that it should regress in the next few months.