

Teeth - wisdom teeth

Wisdom teeth are the rear molars that erupt last, sometime around the late teens or early 20s. There are normally two wisdom teeth in the upper jaw and two in the lower jaw, but some people have fewer than four or even none at all. Wisdom teeth can cause various oral health or dental problems, including overcrowding and impaction. Common problems associated with impacted wisdom teeth include gum infections and tooth decay.

Impaction is where the wisdom tooth erupts at an angle and either butts into the next-door tooth (hard impaction) or the gum (soft impaction). A wisdom tooth that grows on an angle can't contribute to chewing, which makes it useless and painful. It is sometimes recommended that problematic wisdom teeth be removed. X-rays taken while the teeth are still emerging can show whether or not they will cause difficulties.

Symptoms

The symptoms of an infection caused by a wisdom tooth include:

- Reddened, inflamed gum alongside the wisdom tooth
- Swelling
- Pain
- Pus coming from the gum line
- The lymph glands under the jaw become sore
- It may become difficult to open the mouth and to swallow
- Fever.

Common complications

In some cases, there may not be enough room in the jaw for the emerging wisdom teeth. This can stall their exit (soft impaction), and make brushing and flossing these teeth difficult. Food and bacteria will build up between the wisdom tooth and its neighbouring molar tooth, which can make decay and gum infections more likely.

Crowded wisdom teeth in the upper jaw have a tendency to lean sideways and grate against the cheek. This may cause ulcers on the cheek and chewing problems. The pressure from wisdom teeth may also force the other teeth closer together and interfere with a person's bite. Cysts are other complications of impacted wisdom teeth. Very rarely, a tumour may develop at the site.

Antibiotics are a short-term solution

Mouth infections caused by wisdom teeth can be treated with antibiotics, but the infection may keep coming back unless the teeth are removed. People with pre-existing health problems and compromised immunity may suffer complications from these infections.

Extraction (removal) of wisdom teeth is best done early

Wisdom teeth don't usually cause any pain until the damage has already been done. Therefore extraction is best performed sooner rather than later. The roots of wisdom teeth in a teenager are still forming, which makes extraction easier. The operation may be more complicated if a person waits until later in life, when the roots of these molars are completely formed. X-rays taken while the teeth are still emerging can show whether or not they will cause problems.

Extraction of wisdom teeth

Using x-rays, your dentist or other oral health professional can determine which wisdom teeth will be functional and which ones need to be removed. Sometimes, a person may need all of the wisdom teeth extracted. The operation can be performed using local or general anaesthetic, depending on the complexity of the problem.

If a wisdom tooth is potentially functional but has impacted into the gum, your dentist may only need to snip away the soft tissue. If the whole tooth needs to be removed, it may be necessary to cut into nearby bone. Since a wisdom tooth is comparatively large, after extraction the socket will need to be stitched to aid healing. Your jaw and gum are likely to be sore, swollen and prone to bleeding for a few days after the operation.

One of the possible post-surgery complications is a dry socket (alveolar osteitis), where the site doesn't heal as well as it should. This can be successfully treated by your dentist or other oral health professional.

Self-care suggestions

Your dentist or other oral health professional will offer instructions on caring for your mouth after surgery, but general suggestions for self-care after an extraction include:

- Take painkillers if required and upon advice from your dentist or other oral health professional
- Regularly hold a mouthful of warm salty water (after meals only) and upon instruction. Be sure to wait 24 hours after surgery before doing this.
- Eat soft, easy-to-chew foods for the next few days.

Financial assistance

Some young people and adults are eligible for dental and public oral health services. Young people and adults are eligible for these services if they:

- Have a Health Care Card or are a dependant of a card holder, or receive Youth Allowance or Education Maintenance Allowance
- Are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
- Are a newly arrived refugee or asylum seeker
- Are enrolled in special or special development schools
- Are in residential care provided by the Children, Youth and Families Division of the Department of Human Services.

Where to get help

- Your dentist, oral surgeon or other oral health professional
- The Royal Dental Hospital of Melbourne clinic Tel. (03) 9341 1000 8.30am to 5.00pm Monday to Friday
- For emergencies contact your public oral health service or the Royal Dental Hospital emergency service Tel. (03) 9341 1000 or 1800 833 039 (from rural Victoria) 8.30am to 9.15pm Monday to Friday and 9.00am to 9.15pm on weekends and public holidays.

Things to remember

- Wisdom teeth are the rear molars that erupt sometime around the late teens or early 20s.
- Wisdom teeth can cause various dental problems including overcrowding of the existing teeth and impaction, either into neighbouring teeth or into the gum.
- Problematic wisdom teeth should be removed.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Dental Health Services Victoria

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