
Wisdom teeth

Summary

- Wisdom teeth are the last molars that usually come through during your late teens or early 20s.
- Wisdom teeth can cause various dental problems including overcrowding of the existing teeth, and impaction.
- Impaction is when a wisdom tooth comes through at an angle and pushes into the gum or the tooth beside it.
- Problem wisdom teeth can also cause infection, leading to pain, difficulty chewing and bad breath. In certain cases, wisdom teeth can lead to serious infections and swellings.
- If your wisdom teeth are causing problems, it is recommended that you have them removed.

Wisdom teeth are the molars (back teeth) that come through last, usually in your late teens or early 20s. This is a normal part of mouth development. There are normally four wisdom teeth – two in the upper jaw and two in the lower jaw – but some people have more, fewer, or even none at all.

Some wisdom teeth come through without causing any issues, but others are problematic and may need removal or other treatment.

Problems with wisdom teeth

Some wisdom teeth erupt (emerge through the gum) without causing any problems, but sometimes, wisdom teeth come through at an angle and push into the gum or the tooth beside them. This is called impaction.

Impaction of a wisdom tooth can be painful and sometimes causes infection. Brushing these teeth can be difficult. Food and bacteria can get stuck between the wisdom tooth and the tooth next to it, leading to tooth decay and gum infections.

Crowded wisdom teeth in the upper jaw often lean sideways and rub against the cheek. This may cause ulcers on the cheek and chewing problems.

Your oral health professional may recommend that your wisdom teeth be removed if:

- there is not enough room in your mouth for your wisdom teeth to come through properly – removing a tooth early may help prevent a future problem
- you are experiencing:
 - pain
 - infection
 - damage to other teeth.

They may also recommend keeping a watch on the tooth in case it looks like causing problems later.

Symptoms of wisdom teeth infection

Signs of gum infection caused by wisdom teeth include:

- red, inflamed gum near the wisdom tooth
- swelling
- pain
- pus coming from the gum
- swollen and sore lymph nodes underneath the jaw
- difficulty opening the mouth and swallowing

- fever
- bad breath.

Treatment for wisdom teeth infection

Infections caused by wisdom teeth can be treated:

- by improving oral hygiene in the area
- by having the area cleaned by a dentist
- sometimes, by the prescription of antibiotics.

However, the infection may keep coming back if problem teeth are not removed. People who have other health problems, especially people with lower immunity, may have complications from these infections.

Removal of wisdom teeth

X-rays will help to tell if wisdom teeth might cause problems. Some wisdom teeth do not cause problems and do not need to be taken out.

If your wisdom teeth do need to be taken out, you may be given a local anaesthetic so you won't feel it – this is the most common pain relief option. Sometimes, however, if your wisdom teeth are deeply impacted (blocked from coming through), or for other medical reasons, you may be offered a general anaesthetic.

Because wisdom teeth are large, the hole where the tooth was may be stitched to help it heal. It is normal for your jaw and gum to be sore, swollen and bleed for a few days after having a wisdom tooth out.

One possible complication of wisdom teeth removal is a dry socket (alveolar osteitis), when the area where the tooth came from doesn't heal properly. Bad breath and severe pain from the socket are signs. A dry socket can be successfully treated by your oral health professional.

Problem wisdom teeth are best removed early

Wisdom teeth don't usually cause any pain until they start to do damage, so it is best to find out if your wisdom teeth are likely to cause problems sooner rather than later.

The roots of wisdom teeth are still forming when you are a teenager, so it is easier to take them out at this age. It may be more complicated if you wait until later in life, when the roots are fully formed.

Care after surgery for removal of wisdom teeth

Your oral health professional will talk with you about how to care for your mouth after having a wisdom tooth taken out. Some general suggestions include:

- Take pain-relieving medication if needed (and on advice from your oral health professional).
- Hold warm salty water in your mouth. Do this after meals and no earlier than 24 hours after surgery.
- Eat soft, easy-to-chew foods for the next few days.
- Don't smoke for 48 hours after the surgery.
- Avoid alcohol.

Where to get help

- Your **dentist**
- Your **oral and maxillofacial surgeon**
- **Dental Health Services Victoria** provides public dental services through the Royal Dental Hospital Melbourne and community dental clinics, for eligible people. For more information about public dental services Tel. **(03) 9341 1000**, or **1800 833 039** outside Melbourne metro
- **Australian Dental Association 'Find a Dentist'** search function or Tel. **(03) 8825 4600**

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