
Wisdom teeth

Summary

- Wisdom teeth are the rear 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.
 - Problematic wisdom teeth should be removed.
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Wisdom teeth are the molars (back teeth) that come through last, usually in your late teens or early 20s. 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. Sometimes, a wisdom tooth comes through at an angle and pushes into the gum or the tooth beside it. This is called impaction, and it can be painful and make the area difficult to keep clean.

Problems with wisdom teeth

When there is not enough room in the jaw for wisdom teeth, it can stop them coming through properly. 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.

Symptoms of wisdom teeth infection

Signs of gum infection caused by a wisdom tooth 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. Sometimes, the dentist or oral surgeon may just need to cut a small part of the gum to help the wisdom tooth come through.

If wisdom teeth do need to be taken out, most commonly a local anaesthetic will be used, so you won't feel it. Sometimes, if the wisdom teeth are deeply impacted (blocked from coming through), or for other medical reasons, a general anaesthetic will be offered to the patient. 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 in a teenager so it is easier to take them out at this age. It may be more complicated if a person waits 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
- Better Health Channel – **Seeing a dentist or dental health practitioner**

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