

Oral Health Tips

The Wisdom On Wisdom Teeth

Wisdom teeth are no different than other teeth, except that they are the last ones to grow into the mouth. Wisdom teeth usually erupt between the ages of 17 and 21 years, presumably the stage of life when a person gains maturity and wisdom. Wisdom teeth, officially known as “third molars,” are one to four permanent teeth that come in at the ends of the rows of upper and lower teeth. Some people do not grow any wisdom teeth.

Healthy and properly positioned wisdom teeth can be as useful as other teeth. However, they can cause problems if the teeth do not erupt into the mouth properly. The most common reason for improperly erupted wisdom teeth is that the jaw size is often too small to hold the developing teeth. This happens because our jaws are smaller than those of early humans who needed large jaws and more teeth to chew a tougher diet. That’s why teens ages 16 to 19 should have the health and positioning of their wisdom teeth evaluated by their dentist.

What Is an Impacted Wisdom Tooth?

When there is not enough room in the mouth for wisdom teeth, they become impacted. Impaction means that the tooth may be partially trapped by the jawbone, back teeth or gums. These teeth can grow sideways, emerge only part way from the gum or remain trapped beneath the gum and bone. Just because a tooth has not erupted doesn’t mean it is impacted. The person’s teeth may be developing slowly and it may be too early to tell. Only a dentist, with the use of X-rays, can determine if the jaw size can accommodate up to four wisdom teeth and whether the teeth are growing properly.

Impacted teeth can cause infection, decay of adjacent teeth, gum disease, the formation of fluid filled sacs called cysts or even tumors. Many dentists recommend removal of impacted wisdom teeth because they may continue growing without enough room, damaging adjacent teeth and bone when any of the following occur:

- Erupted or partially erupted wisdom teeth, which may interfere with the bite or leave an opening for bacteria to enter around the tooth, causing infection
- Poorly aligned wisdom teeth, which can affect the adjacent teeth
- A newly formed cyst, which can affect the surrounding bone or root structures

Pain or infection in the mouth, facial swelling and swelling of the gumline are frequent problems with wisdom teeth. Every case is different and some people can keep their wisdom teeth. Only a dentist can determine if removal is necessary.

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Wisdom Teeth

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Eruption of Wisdom Teeth

Factors that determine potential problems with wisdom teeth include the size of the jaw and how the wisdom teeth erupt. Some people experience swelling, and some people do not experience any symptoms at all. Erupted wisdom teeth may also need to be removed. The dentist may recommend extraction if the tooth is nonfunctional, interfering with the bite, decayed, interfering with a restoration of an adjacent tooth, or the tooth has periodontal disease or is involved with a tooth that has periodontal disease. Every case is different and the dentist should determine if any of the factors are present to warrant wisdom tooth extraction.

Adults may have forgotten what an erupting tooth feels like. Each individual experiences the symptoms of an erupting tooth differently. Some of the common signs and symptoms include:

- Pain
- Infection in the mouth
- Facial swelling
- Swelling of the gumline in the back of the mouth

When Is the Best Time to Remove Wisdom Teeth?

It is wise to remove the wisdom teeth when the roots of the teeth are approximately three-fourths formed, which usually is during the late adolescent years. It is also important to consider removing wisdom teeth that need to be removed before they become impacted, or if there is no room for them to appear in the mouth.

Teeth that need to be removed should be done before age 20 when fewer complications occur and healing is generally faster. At this younger age, tooth roots are not fully developed, bone is less dense and there is less chance of damaging nearby nerves and surrounding bone and teeth.

Women who are taking an oral contraceptive are twice as likely to develop a painful condition known as dry socket because of their increased estrogen level. It is important to try to schedule the extraction procedure during the last week of their menstrual cycle because of the

decreased level of estrogen. When the estrogen levels are inactive late in the cycle, the healing process can occur immediately following the procedure. Women taking an oral contraceptive have a 30 percent greater chance of developing a dry socket if the tooth is extracted during the first 22 days of their menstrual cycle.

The actual extraction can be done by a dentist or it may be referred to an oral surgeon who is a specialist. The decision is based on the dentist's and the patient's preference and any case specifics such as how deep the roots are and whether the teeth are erupted or impacted. The procedure can be done either in a dentist or oral surgeon's office, surgical center or hospital. The dentist or oral surgeon will review the recommended procedure with the patient before the procedure is performed. The patient will also be given instructions to follow for both pre and post surgery. Normally the patient will go home shortly after the procedure unless there has been an intravenous sedation or general anesthetic given. Then the patient may be under observation until the surgeon is satisfied with the recovery.

What to Expect in a Tooth Extraction

There are several methods that can be used to remove wisdom teeth. It can be performed under local anesthetic, intravenous sedation or general anesthesia. An extraction involves getting access to the tooth through the soft and sometimes hard tissue, gently detaching the connective tissue between the tooth and bone, and removing the tooth. Expect the procedure itself to last up to an hour. But it is good to allow a longer time frame for preparation and recovery.

Post-operative care includes controlling any swelling with ice packs and controlling bleeding with a pressure pack of folded gauze pads, which is placed over the extraction site. A soft diet is generally best for the first few days following the procedure. If you notice any unusual bleeding, swelling or pain, it is important to call your dentist or oral surgeon. The first six to eight hours are usually uncomfortable and should be able to be managed with over-the-counter

medication or with the pain medication prescribed by the surgeon. Teeth can be brushed immediately, being careful to avoid the surgical areas for the first day or so.

Generally, there is not much disruption of one's activities for more than a few days. Sometimes the patient can return to work or school on the day following surgery, even when all four wisdom teeth have been removed.

How to Prevent a Dry Socket

Dry socket is the most common post-procedure complication from wisdom teeth extraction. A dry socket occurs when the normal healing process is interrupted by an improperly formed blood clot or a newly formed blood clot is dislodged too early. This results in the underlying bone being exposed. A blood clot is a necessary foundation for new tissue and bone to grow and heal over a two-month timeframe. When the clot is lost, the cavity becomes dry and is not able to heal, resulting in a painful post-operative complication. Generally, dry sockets occur more often on the bottom teeth. The condition is preventable. A few simple steps can prevent the condition:

- Avoid disturbing the wound for the first 24 hours.
- Avoid drinking through a straw because the suction will interfere with blood clotting.
- Avoid smoking because it can contaminate the extraction site.
- Avoid excessive mouth rinsing which may interfere with blood clotting.

If you have a teenager, it is a good time to check with their dentist to see if their wisdom teeth are beginning to erupt. X-rays can help the dentist determine if their wisdom teeth will cause problems in the near future or later in life. If one or more of their wisdom teeth needs to be removed, it is generally advisable to have the extractions performed as a young adult before any complications arise. Check with the dentist to see if wisdom teeth extraction is recommended.

Sources: American Dental Association: www.ada.org
Academy of General Dentistry: www.agd.org
American Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons: www.aaoms.org