

WISDOM TEETH

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Third molar teeth, or wisdom teeth, as they are commonly referred to, are the last teeth to erupt into your mouth. In humans, there are typically four third molar teeth, two in the upper jaw (maxilla) and two in the lower jaw (mandible). Third molar teeth typically develop in the jawbone and erupt into the oral cavity between the ages of 16 and 21.

Wisdom teeth commonly affect other teeth as they develop, often becoming impacted or misaligned. Impaction occurs when the wisdom tooth does not have enough room to erupt properly into the oral cavity and remains fully, or partially encapsulated in jawbone and gum tissue. If it is completely encased in the jawbone, it is a bony impaction. If the wisdom tooth has erupted out of the jawbone but not through the gumline, it is called a soft tissue impaction.

Extraction of wisdom teeth is encouraged to prevent damage to the adjacent teeth. Impacted teeth can be painful and lead to infection. They may also crowd or damage adjacent teeth or roots. More serious problems may occur if the sac surrounding the impacted tooth becomes filled with fluid and enlarges to form a cyst. As the cyst grows it may hollow out the jaw and permanently damage adjacent teeth, the surrounding bone and nerves. In some cases, if a cyst is not treated, a tumor may develop from its walls and a more serious surgical procedure may be required to remove it.

Despite the considerable concern regarding impacted third molars, a recent study sponsored by the American Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons and the Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery Foundation finds that third molars which have broken through the tissue and erupted into the mouth in a normal, upright position may be as prone to disease as those third molars that remain impacted.

Patients often ask, why must the Tooth Come Out if it Hasn't Caused Any Problems Yet? It isn't wise to wait until your wisdom teeth start to bother you. In general, earlier removal of wisdom teeth results in a less complicated healing process. Not all problems related to third molars are painful or visible. Damage can occur without your being aware of it. As wisdom teeth grow, their roots become longer, the teeth become more difficult to remove and complications become more likely. In addition, impacted wisdom teeth are more likely to cause problems as patients age. No one can predict when third molar complications will occur, but when they do, the circumstances can be much more painful and the teeth more difficult to treat. It is estimated that about 85% of third molars will eventually need to be removed.

The relative ease with which a wisdom tooth may be removed depends on several conditions, including the position of the tooth and root development. Impacted wisdom teeth may require a more involved surgical procedure. Most wisdom tooth extractions are performed in the dental office under local anesthesia, intravenous sedation or general anesthesia. An oral medication may be prescribed to reduce anxiety and stress associated with wisdom tooth extraction. Your dentist will discuss the anesthetic option that is right for you, and depending upon the difficulty of the procedure and potential complications, may refer you to a dental specialist for treatment.

Following surgery, you may experience some swelling and mild discomfort, which are part of the normal healing process. Cold compresses may help decrease the swelling, and medication prescribed by your dentist can help manage the discomfort. You may be instructed to modify your diet following surgery and later progress to more normal foods. Complications of wisdom tooth extraction are infection of the surgical site, transient or in rare cases, permanent numbness, and exposure of the maxillary sinus cavity. These complications are rare, however their potential for occurrence should be discussed with your doctor prior to treatment.