

Wisdom Teeth

Third molars, also known as wisdom teeth, usually do not come through until adulthood, late teens, twenties or even older. Most people have four wisdom teeth but some have none or anything in between. Commonly, there is not enough space at the back of the jaws for these teeth to come through and become functional. Instead, they become impacted. Although a small number of impacted wisdom teeth do not cause any trouble and can be left in place, often they do and require removal.

Common problems caused by impacted wisdom teeth

Infection – An infection can start around the top of the tooth when an impacted wisdom tooth starts to push through the gum. Pain, swelling, jaw stiffness, bad breath, an unpleasant taste or pain on swallowing can result. You may be advised by your dentist to rinse your mouth often with a warm saltwater mouthwash (one teaspoon of salt in a glass of warm water). Your dentist may also prescribe antibiotics and suggest a pain killer before deciding whether removal is necessary.

Crowding – An impacted wisdom tooth may push adjacent teeth out of their position.

Pain – Pressure from a wisdom tooth or infection around a wisdom tooth may cause pain.

Cyst – If a wisdom tooth is not removed, a sac of fluid can form around the tooth, called a cyst. The cyst may displace the tooth, or even destroy bone, damage other teeth and the gums.

A food trap – Food can become trapped between a wisdom tooth and the adjacent tooth causing cavities in both teeth.

Resorptive cavity – An impacted wisdom tooth which pushes against its adjacent tooth can cause a resorption cavity where they contact. Both teeth may become infected or abscessed. Removal of both molars is sometimes required.

What's next:

After examining your mouth, jaws and x-ray films, your dentist can discuss the diagnosis with you and recommend whether none, one or more of the wisdom teeth require removal. At times, it is best to remove troublesome wisdom teeth early while the patient is young. In young people, a tooth's roots have not formed completely and the bone surrounding the tooth is softer allowing for easier removal and reduced risk of damage to nerves, bone or other teeth. If your wisdom teeth are likely to be very difficult or complicated to remove due to the shape and position of the teeth, your dentist may refer you to an oral and maxillofacial surgeon.

