

Wisdom Teeth

WISDOM TEETH ARE THE LAST teeth to erupt into the mouth, and they are usually the first to be removed. Not only are wisdom teeth the cause of pain and infection, but they can also cause problems that are imperceptible.

Wisdom teeth, also known as third molars, are the last teeth to develop in the mouth. They will usually develop between 17 to 25 years of age. They are generally thought to be called “wisdom teeth” because they appear so late — much later than the other teeth — at an age where people are presumably wiser than as a child when the other

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teeth erupt. Wisdom teeth are known to not only have the most variation in shape and size, but also the most variation in position in development. Some wisdom teeth erupt into place perfectly, while others develop and erupt at an angle that leads to impaction.

Impacted wisdom teeth are categorized based on positioning. If the tooth 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. Sometimes the wisdom tooth fails to erupt completely through the gum tissue, where only a small portion of the tooth is visible, called a partial soft tissue impaction. The gum tissue that overlies the partially impacted wisdom tooth is called an operculum.

Is there a need to extract all wisdom teeth? If the wisdom tooth erupts fully into place and

is maintainable, then there is no indication to remove this tooth. A maintainable tooth is one that can be brushed and flossed effectively. There is no concrete evidence that well-positioned wisdom teeth cause the front teeth to become crowded and mal-aligned. This is evidenced by the fact that people without wisdom teeth also have front teeth that become crowded and mal-aligned.

Wisdom teeth should be considered for removal if the tooth is impacted. Impacted wisdom teeth can cause several problems. First, if the impacted tooth is positioned against the root of the adjacent second molar tooth, damage to the root can occur, often leading to the loss of this tooth. Second, if plaque and debris collect under the operculum and around the impacted tooth, a painful infection termed pericoronitis is going to develop. Third, a cyst can develop from a sac around the impacted tooth. As the sac fills with fluid, a cyst forms, which may hollow out the jaw and permanently damage adjacent teeth, the surrounding bone, and nerves. Rarely, if this cyst is not treated, a tumor may develop from its walls and a more serious surgical procedure may be required to remove it.

Your dentist can tell you whether or not you have wisdom teeth and if they are impacted and placing you at risk for problems. Oral surgeons are specialists in the removal of wisdom teeth and they are a great resource to give advice about your wisdom teeth. If they do need to be removed, the American Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons strongly states that they be removed by the time the patient is a young adult. This not only minimizes the potential for the aforementioned problems associated with impacted wisdom teeth, but the surgical procedure to remove them is less complicated. Your oral surgeon can discuss the specifics of the surgery, the options for anesthesia, and the usual postoperative care. The wise thing to do is to have your dentist evaluate you and your teenagers for impacted wisdom teeth before problems start. 

PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO



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