

Wisdom Teeth – Keep them or pull them?

The final teeth to erupt are the wisdom teeth, which are the third molars on each side of the upper and lower jaws. Wisdom teeth are thought to have garnered their name because they come in during our late teens to early twenties when we (supposedly!) gain maturity and wisdom. Conventional “wisdom” was to extract all four back molars before they caused problems, but whether or not to extract has come under closer scrutiny in recent years. Is it always necessary to pull wisdom teeth?

As the third molars come in after all other teeth, many people experience painful symptoms from overcrowding. Wisdom teeth often become twisted, tilted, and even try to erupt horizontally. If molars lack sufficient room to erupt through the gums, they can become impacted. An impacted tooth can form a cyst, which can damage the roots of neighboring teeth and even destroy the supporting bone. This can cause a great deal of pain; however, some impacted teeth show no symptoms, so it's essential for your dentist to closely monitor this stage in your teeth development.

The American Dental Association recommends young adults between 16 and 19 have their wisdom teeth evaluated for signs of overcrowding, infection or impaction. Many dentists and oral surgeons believe it's best to remove problem wisdom teeth when patients are younger because the roots and bone are not yet fully formed. Recovery after extraction is quicker and patients are less likely to suffer complications if removed early.

If you are experiencing pain, or your dentist has found signs of infection, a cyst, damage to nearby teeth, tooth decay or gum disease in the area, your dentist may recommend removal. Even if no symptoms are present, your dentist or orthodontist may recommend extraction of wisdom teeth to prepare for orthodontic treatment, as crooked teeth are often caused by an overcrowded mouth.

If your dentist has recommended removal of your wisdom teeth, you might expect post-surgery swelling and tenderness in the face and neck. Some individuals also experience slight bruising. Formable ice packs and pain medications are often prescribed, along with a full day of bed rest to prevent pain, swelling or increased bleeding.

It's important young adults have wisdom teeth closely evaluated as they come in so their dentist can watch for signs of overcrowding and infection. Many people have no problems with wisdom teeth that remain healthy and are properly aligned. If removing wisdom teeth is in question, ask your dentist for a thorough assessment and the clinical reason for removal. As with any dental procedure, a comprehensive evaluation by your dentist is always essential to make an informed decision.