

Wisdom teeth: removal of wisdom teeth

This leaflet has been designed to improve your understanding of any forthcoming treatment and contains answers to many of the commonly asked questions. If you have any other questions that the leaflet does not answer or would like further explanation please ask.

The problem

The wisdom tooth (or third molar) is usually the last tooth to erupt into the mouth anytime after about 16 years of age. Frequently there is not enough room to accommodate wisdom teeth and they are unable to grow normally. When this happens, the wisdom teeth are said to be “impacted”. Wisdom teeth may be either impacted into the neighbouring tooth or backwards into the jaw bone.

Why do I need treatment?

An impacted wisdom tooth can cause a number of problems that mean the tooth is best removed. Most commonly these are:

- Repeated attacks of infection in the gum surrounding the tooth. This leads to pain and swelling.
- Food packing in either the wisdom tooth or the neighbouring tooth, which causes decay.
- Cysts can form around the wisdom tooth if it does not grow properly. A cyst occurs when fluid fills the sack that normally surrounds a developing wisdom tooth.
- Decay in the wisdom or decay starting in the tooth in front.

What does the treatment involve?

If the wisdom tooth has not fully erupted into the mouth it may be necessary to make a cut in the gum over the tooth. Sometimes it is also necessary to remove some bone surrounding the crown of the wisdom tooth. Rarely the tooth needs to be cut into 2 or 3 pieces to remove it. Once the wisdom tooth has been removed the gum is put back into place with stitches. These stitches are dissolvable and take around two weeks to disappear.

What type of anaesthetic is used?

A number of options are available depending on how difficult the wisdom tooth is to remove:

- Local anaesthetic - this is an injection into the gum surrounding the wisdom tooth. It is similar to the one used by your dentist for a filling. The injection takes a couple of minutes to numb the area and means that you will feel no pain while the wisdom tooth is removed. This is the best option for wisdom teeth that are simple to remove.
- General anaesthetic – it is usually possible to remove wisdom teeth under a “day case” general anaesthetic, i.e. although you are put to sleep completely you will be able to go home on the same day as surgery.

How long does it take to remove a wisdom tooth?

This is a variable. Some wisdom teeth may take only a few minutes to remove. More difficult wisdom teeth that need to be cut into pieces can take around 20 minutes to extract.

Is there much pain or swelling after the removal of wisdom teeth?

It is likely that there will be some discomfort and swelling both on the inside and outside of your mouth after surgery. This is usually worse for the first three days but it may take up to two weeks before all the soreness goes. You may also find that your jaw is stiff and you may need to eat a soft diet for a week or so. It may also be necessary for you to have a course of antibiotics after the extraction. There may be some bruising of the skin of your face that can take up to a fortnight to fade away.

Is there anything else I need to do after the extractions?

It is important to keep the extraction sites as clean as possible for the first few weeks after surgery. It may be difficult to clean your teeth around the sites of the extraction because it is sore and if this is the case it is recommended to keep the area free from food debris by gently rinsing with an alcohol free mouthwash, or warm salt water (dissolve a level teaspoon of kitchen salt in a cup of warm water) commencing on the day after surgery. Instructions on how to care for the area will be given to you after the procedure.

Do I need to take any time off work?

Usually it will be necessary to take a few days off work and avoid strenuous exercise for this time. If you have a general anaesthetic you can't drive for 48 hours.

What are the possible problems?

- Although there may be a little bleeding at the time of the extraction this usually stops very quickly and is unlikely to be a problem if the wound is stitched. Should the area bleed again when you get home this can usually be stopped by applying pressure over the area for at least 10 minutes with a rolled up handkerchief or swab. If the bleeding does not stop, please contact the department.
- Infection is uncommon particularly if antibiotics are used.

- There are two nerves that lie very close to the roots of the lower wisdom teeth. One of these nerves supplies feeling to your lower lip, chin and lower teeth. The other supplies feeling to your tongue and helps with taste. Sometimes these nerves may be bruised when a wisdom tooth is taken out. This can cause tingling or numbness in your lip, chin or tongue, and more rarely altered taste. About one in 10 people will have some tingling or numbness that can last several weeks. Less than one in 100 people will have problems that last more than a year. These risks may be higher if your tooth is in a difficult position. The surgeon will tell you if you are considered to be at an increased risk.

Contact us

Oral & Maxillofacial Department Tel: 0118 322 7139 Fax: 0118 322 7675.

Further information

Visit the Trust website at www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

This document can be made available in other languages and formats upon request.

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