

Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery Department

This leaflet explains: **Removal of impacted wisdom teeth**

This information is for patients who may need to have an operation to remove their impacted wisdom teeth. It explains why they may need to be removed, what is involved any risks or complications that there may be.

The wisdom tooth (or third molar) is usually the last tooth to erupt into the mouth any time after about 16 years of age. Frequently there is not enough room to accommodate wisdom teeth and as such they do not come into the mouth normally. When this happens, the wisdom teeth are said to be “impacted”. Wisdom teeth are usually either impacted forwards into the tooth in front or backwards into the jaw bone.

Reasons for the removal of wisdom teeth

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

1. Recurrent infection of the gum overlying a tooth that is part way through the gum (**pericoronitis**).
2. **Decay (caries)** in the wisdom tooth, which your dentist cannot restore.
3. Infection of the tooth (**abscess**) due to advanced dental decay.
4. When the adjacent molar tooth is affected by gum (periodontal) disease or dental decay due to the impacted wisdom tooth.
5. Progressive **cystic (fluid filled sac) formation** around the tooth.
6. As part of other surgical procedures involving the jaw.
7. There may be other less common reasons that your surgeon will discuss with you.

What does the treatment involve?

Because the wisdom tooth has not fully erupted into the mouth it is often 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. In the majority of cases these stitches are dissolvable and take around two weeks to disappear.

What type of anaesthetic is used?

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

- **Local anaesthetic** - this is an injection into gum surrounding the wisdom tooth, rather similar to that you may have had at 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.
- **Local anaesthetic and intravenous sedation** – in addition to a local anaesthetic injection you can be given an injection into your arm. This makes you feel relaxed and less aware of the procedure.
- **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 to remove 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. If it is likely to be sore your surgeon will arrange painkillers for you. 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 best to keep the area free from food debris by gently rinsing with a mouthwash or warm salt water (dissolve a flat teaspoon of kitchen salt in a cup of warm water) commencing on the day after surgery.

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. Depending on the type of anaesthetic used you may well not be able to drive (24 hours after intravenous sedation and for 48 hours after a general anaesthetic)

What are the possible problems?

- **Bleeding** - 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.
- **Nerve damage** - 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.

Adapted from The British Association for Oral Surgeons (BAOS).

Available online at www.baos.org.uk