The Troublesome Wisdom Tooth

Your wisdom teeth or third molars are the last teeth to emerge from your gums during your late teens or ‘age of wisdom’, which gives them this name. Unfortunately, there is often insufficient room and they become impacted, or trapped, in the jaw bone and gums, and fail to erupt as straight and fully functioning teeth. Impacted teeth may have to be removed, a procedure that is performed either by your regular dentist or a maxillofacial surgeon.

Why a Wisdom Tooth has to be removed

Gum Infection

A half buried tooth at the back of the mouth may be difficult to clean and the resulting bacterial and food stagnation may give rise to recurrent infections of the surrounding gum. It is the commonest problem associated with impacted teeth and usually the only satisfactory treatment is to remove the offending tooth.

Decay

Bacterial and food stagnation associated with a buried tooth may cause decay in an adjacent tooth. Ideally the wisdom tooth should be removed before decay begins in the adjacent tooth. If decay is already present, removal of the wisdom tooth will prevent decay progressing and allow dentist access for restorative treatment.

Crowding

If you have had orthodontic treatment your orthodontist may suggest removal of wisdom teeth to prevent recurrence of crowding and relapse of the treatment. The eruption of wisdom teeth in your late teens or early twenties may contribute to the development of crowding in a previously regular dentition. Unfortunately, removal of the wisdom teeth will not allow the irregular front teeth to return to normal, but will help prevent further deterioration.
Other problems

There are many other, less common problems associated with impacted wisdom teeth.

Your Pre-Operative Visit

Removal of wisdom teeth is a common procedure. It may be done by your family dentist or you may be referred to a Maxillofacial Surgeon.

Your Medical & Dental History

Your surgeon will first take your medical and dental history. You will be asked about medical problems that could interfere with surgery and anaesthesia.

Examination

Your surgeon will inspect your mouth and jaws. You may also be given a brief physical evaluation to assess your fitness for surgery and anaesthesia.

X-rays

X-rays showing the entire wisdom tooth are necessary to help diagnose your problem and determine appropriate treatment.

Choosing Surgery

After examining you and analysing your x-rays, your surgeon can discuss the diagnosis with you and can provide you with information about the surgical treatment of your impacted wisdom teeth as well as possible alternatives to surgery.

The decision to have your wisdom teeth removed is always yours. If you decide in favour of surgery you will be asked to sign a consent form before the operation.

Your Operation

Local Anaesthetic or General Anaesthesia

Many wisdom teeth can be removed under local anaesthetic as you would have for routine fillings. However, if they are a little more complicated we may
recommend treatment under general anaesthesia. If so you may need to spend a night in hospital after the operation.
We may also ask you to come in the night before the operation in order that all the necessary administrative tasks can be sorted out.

Recovery from Surgery

You must be fully aware from the outset that in all surgical procedures there are possible complications. The degree of success certainly depends on the skill and experience of the surgeon and anaesthetist; equally important are the specific problem, the age, health and co-operation of the patient. These are all widely variable factors which limit the surgeon and affect the surgical result. After surgery you may experience some temporary changes in the mouth and cheek area. Here is what to expect:-

Pain

Discomfort is usually the greatest the first night after surgery. Your surgeon or anaesthetist will prescribe a pain medication for you and you may be given medication to reduce the amount of swelling.

Drowsiness

A general anaesthetic for any operation will make you drowsy for some time afterwards. You may feel perfectly fit the following day but you must not drive a vehicle or handle machinery for 24 hours after a general anaesthetic or intravenous sedation. If possible it would be wise to allow 4-5 days off work if your wisdom teeth are removed under a general anaesthetic.

Infection

You will normally be given antibiotics during and after surgery to help prevent infection. Healing can be delayed if the blood clot covering the socket is dissolved or washed away. Post-operative infection can usually be treated by administering further antibiotics or draining the infection or both.

Numbness (Paraesthesia)

Impacted teeth may be close to, or in actual contact with the nerves that supply sensation to the teeth, gums, chin, cheek, lips & tongue. These nerves can become injured when the tooth is removed, causing numbness and tingling. In most cases, if this happens at all, the nerve repairs in a short time. In a few cases, numbness can be permanent.
Alveolar nerve provides sensation to the lips and chin

Diagram shows impacted wisdom tooth and inferior alveolar nerve

**Weakening of the jaw**

Although it rarely occurs, removal of an impacted tooth can weaken the jaw, making it more susceptible to fracture. Usually your surgeon will be able to recognize any real risk of this in advance and will warn you accordingly, but the unexpected can always happen.

*If you wish to discuss any aspects of your treatment further please do not hesitate to ask.*

**Further information is available from**

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