

# WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT WISDOM TEETH

by DAVID CAGGIANO, M.S., D.M.D.

At any given time, ask half a dozen adults around you about their wisdom teeth, and there is a good chance you will find that most have had them removed. This is common, considering what they are and some of the risks that they may pose. Many people have them removed during their younger years, for valid reasons, making it a good idea to be familiar with the ins and outs of these teeth, so that you will be better able to deal with them for you and your family.

## WHAT ARE WISDOM TEETH AND WHY ARE THEY REMOVED?

Wisdom teeth, also referred to as your third molars, are the larger teeth at the very back of the mouth. They are the last teeth to come in, usually somewhere between the ages of 15 and 25, which is considered to be the "age of wisdom," hence their name. While some people have no problems with their wisdom teeth erupting, many others find that they present a challenge and can be risky to the health of your other teeth.

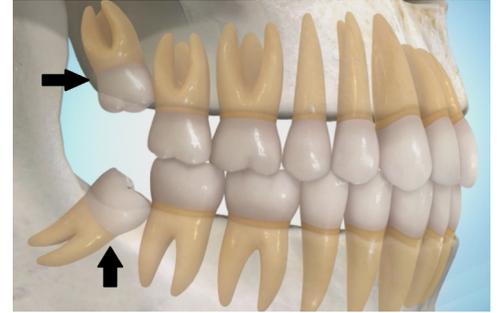
About the time that this third set of molars begins erupting, some common problems also emerge as a result. Some of the problems associated with erupting wisdom teeth include:

**Impaction** - According to the National Institutes of Health, wisdom teeth are the most common teeth to become impacted. When a tooth is impacted, it means that the tooth has failed to emerge through the surface of the gum, or that only a portion of it has emerged. In the other words, it is stuck in the bone.

**Decay** - An impacted third molar leads to a high probability of creating dental caries, or cavities, both in that tooth and in the one next to it, as well. This is because they often trap plaque in the area, which is difficult to reach and to clean.

## Misalignment -

The emerging wisdom teeth may not be coming in straight or, even if they do, can cause problems with the other teeth.



**Discomfort** - The vast majority of people who have dealt with emerging or impacted wisdom teeth know just how uncomfortable the experience can be. From headaches to toothaches, pain, swelling, and feeling ill, the discomfort associated with wisdom teeth can make you miserable.

## DO WISDOM TEETH CAUSE LOWER ANTERIOR TEETH TO SHIFT?

Most people think that when wisdom teeth develop and erupt, they will cause the lower anterior teeth to shift. Research shows this is not true. Think about it – there is no additional crowding of the lower front teeth when the first molars grow in (at age 6) or when the second molars grow in (at age 12). So why would the third molars (which have to push on the first and second molars which are large teeth) then cause the lower anterior teeth to shift? The answer is they don't! Sometimes the lower anterior teeth will shift at about the same time as the wisdom teeth developing, but this is simply due to continued growth of the lower jaw – a very normal and very regular occurrence. If you wear your retainer while the jaw is growing, your teeth will not shift.

## WHEN, TO REMOVE WISDOM TEETH

The best time to have your third molars removed really depends on the tooth's development. A good

professional rule of thumb is to have them removed when two-thirds of the root has formed. Ideally, it is recommended that people have them removed by the time they turn 24 years old. This is because it will help to prevent all of the problems listed above, and because the ability to re-grow bone in that area of the jaw is reduced as time goes on. Also, the third molars are usually easier to remove when you are younger, and the recovery period is also shorter during that time.

The presence of your third molars is usually associated with an increased risk of periodontitis, which is an inflammation of the gums and bone which can lead to tooth loss, abscesses, infections, and tooth shifting. It is important to note, as well, that an absence of symptoms does not mean that there is no problem or disease.

Additionally, research regarding people who did not have their wisdom teeth removed demonstrates that, the older they got, the more common it was for them to have cavities in those teeth, as well as in the adjacent ones, due to the difficulties of keeping them properly cleaned. In fact, a 2011 study published in the Journal of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery reported that, of the nearly 7,000 older adults they studied who had at least one third molar, most of those people had cavities or periodontal disease involving those teeth, and that few had visible molars that were free of disease.

#### **ADDITIONAL CONCERNS**

There is some controversy regarding whether those who wear a retainer or have had braces in the past need to continue wearing their retainer once the wisdom teeth have been removed. Because there is a risk of relapse if the retainer is not worn, it is recommended that patients continue wearing theirs, as recommended by their orthodontist. Doing so will help to eliminate the risks associated with shifting teeth.

If you are experiencing the emergence of your wisdom teeth, or someone in your family is, be sure you know the facts, risks, and options that are currently available. Having wisdom teeth removed is a common procedure today, one that most people recover from without issue. Removing third molars can be an important step to take if you are having problems now, or as a preventive measure to avoid issues that can arise later.

#### **ADDRESSING THE ISSUE**

Either way, it is important to speak with your doctor to learn more about your specific third molar development, risks, and options. When you are dealing with your third molars, it may seem as if they steal the show, due to the discomfort they can cause. But it doesn't have to be like that, since this is an issue that can usually be addressed without difficulty.

Wisdom teeth really are an issue that is better dealt with sooner, rather than later, in order to avoid a lot of discomfort, as well as the risk of an array of complications. Besides, when you address this issue head on, rather than putting it off and prolonging the issue, you will find that you gain the wisdom, without all the worry!