Ian Corbett

Specialist Oral Surgeon

Wisdom Teeth

Wisdom teeth are the last permanent teeth to erupt, usually in late teens or early twenties, and may cause discomfort or swelling as they do. Although there are four wisdom teeth, two on top and two lower, not everyone has all four, and not all four may come through. Often there is not enough room in the jaw for wisdom teeth to fit and they get trapped or impacted. When this happens swelling, pain and infection can occur from repeated infections and with time the teeth may decay because their position makes it difficult to keep them clean. If you have suffered three or more episodes of pain and swelling or a single severe episode requiring treatment this may be a reason for the teeth to be removed. When the teeth become decayed their position may make it difficult for your dentist to place a filling and this may be another reason for extraction. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) have produced guidelines which dentists follow as to whether a wisdom tooth should be removed. The guidelines give the following reasons for extraction:

* Unrestorable decay in the wisdom tooth
* Repeated episodes of infection, or a severe infection
* Facial swelling as a result of wisdom tooth infection
* Fracture of the tooth due to trauma
* Cyst or tumours involving a wisdom tooth
* Damage to the adjacent tooth
* To enable jaw surgery

We will discuss the need for removal of your wisdom tooth at your consultation, sometimes we suggest the tooth is not removed and we will then give you advice on looking after the tooth and ask your own dentist to check on the tooth at routine visits.

Wisdom teeth are often removed by numbing the area only, although if you are anxious about the procedure, we can discuss sedation. Once numb the procedure to remove the tooth depends on its position and the shape of its roots. It is sometimes necessary to uncover the tooth and divide it into smaller pieces to remove it more easily. You may have stitches, which dissolve and disappear as the area heals.

After wisdom tooth removal it is normal to have pain, bleeding, swelling, bruising and a stiff jaw, please see our surgical removal of teeth information. We will give you aftercare instructions and advice on avoiding problems. After surgical removal of a wisdom tooth you may need regular painkillers for 3-4 days after your surgery, and healing continues for up to 2 weeks. Other problems include a ‘dry socket’ and infection to the surgical site. We will give you instructions on signs of infection and contact numbers for advice and arrange to see you for treatment if necessary.

Another complication of wisdom tooth removal is nerve injury. The feeling in your lower teeth, chin and lip, and taste to the front of your tongue is supplied by a nerve which runs through the lower jaw in a narrow bony tunnel. It passes alongside, through or under the roots of lower wisdom teeth and surgery on these teeth may injure the nerve. Nerve injury happens in around 1 in every 100 wisdom teeth removals. Usually the injury is temporary and causes a tingling or ’pins and needles’ feeling in the lip and chin, a numb feeling like the injection has not worn off, or sometimes an uncomfortable feeling; as there is a nerve on each side of your jaw it only affects one side of your lip, chin or tongue. This may last from days to weeks and if it has not gone after three months it is generally permanent. As the nerve supplies feeling only, your mouth and face will move normally, and other people will not be aware of the nerve injury. Although this may be worrying at the start, most patients tend to get used to the feeling and need no further treatment. There are surgical operations to repair the nerve, and if this were to happen, we would investigate the injury and discuss the options with you.

We will give you advice on the risk of nerve injury based on the radiographs (x-rays) that are taken before surgery. If we think there is a moderate or high risk of nerve injury, we will offer you the option to have a three-dimensional scan of the area, called a cone beam computed tomograph (CBCT). This shows the exact position of the nerve and roots, which we are only able to estimate from a normal radiograph and will allow us to better decide on the risk to the nerve on extraction of your tooth.

If the tooth itself is healthy and its position is causing problems, then we may offer an alternative treatment called coronectomy. This involves removing only the shiny enamel crown of the tooth, leaving the roots behind, which reduces the risk of injury to the nerve. If the roots become loose during cutting the tooth, then we will need to remove them too, although the risk to the nerve will be no higher than planned removal. The roots are then buried beneath the gum and the area allowed to heal. Occasionally the area fails to heal, and you will need to return for root removal involving further surgery. Again, the risk to the nerve is no higher than extraction at the outset. Buried roots sometimes make their way to the surface of the gum with time, usually years, and may then need removal. If this happens, then the roots are generally further from the nerve and this may mean less risk of nerve injury. We will be happy to discuss if coronectomy is the right procedure for you at your consultation.

We will explain in detail all the complications that may be expected based on your examination and answer any questions you may have at your consultation. We will ask you to sign a consent form to say that the procedure and complications have been explained to you which may occur. We will give you a copy of the consent form to take home with you. Before we begin your surgery, we will explain the procedure again, check if you have any further questions or concerns and make sure you are happy to proceed. You may change your mind anytime before surgery, and we will be happy to discuss alternative options and their risks and benefits with you at any time.

After your wisdom tooth removal, we will give you advice on aftercare and pain control. We will also provide you with contact numbers for the time after surgery and we will be there if you need us for any reason.

Please feel free to contact us for further information or advice.