VICTORIA

WISDOM TEETH

To keep or not to keep? That is the question.

Wisdom teeth are the last permanent teeth to appear and are known as the third molars. They are positioned at the back of the jaws, and can appear as early as 16 years old or as late as 65 years old. Not everyone will have wisdom teeth but generally people have up to four wisdom teeth, two on the top jaw and two on the bottom jaw.



How do I know how many wisdom teeth I have?

If your wisdom teeth are not visible, a full mouth x-ray (OPG) is used to assess the presence and position of these teeth. Your dentist can arrange for the x-ray to be done.

Will wisdom teeth cause crowding in my mouth?

Wisdom teeth can grow in a variety of positions. Crowding of the teeth is a complex issue with many factors playing a role. Previously, wisdom teeth were portrayed as being solely responsible for causing crowding of the front teeth as they pushed forwards. Studies have demonstrated that the wisdom teeth play only a very minor role, and front teeth crowding is just as likely in patients who have had their wisdom teeth removed or are missing them to begin with. While wisdom teeth may not be responsible for causing crowding, removing them may still be recommended for a number of other reasons to ensure the overall health of your mouth.



Will my wisdom teeth have enough space to come through?

The size of your teeth compared to the space available in the jaw will determine whether your wisdom teeth will come through in the correct position. Your dentist or orthodontist will assess the position and angle of the wisdom teeth on your x-ray and can recommend the appropriate management of these teeth. When there is not enough room for the wisdom teeth to come through, they can become wedged or ‘impacted’.

What are the potential consequences of impacted wisdom teeth?

Depending on their severity, impacted wisdom teeth can result in inflammation and infection of the gum covering the impacted tooth. When this happens, gum in the wisdom tooth region will appear red and swollen, and there may also be pain and discomfort, jaw stiffness and a general feeling of being unwell. The impacted wisdom teeth can occasionally cause pressure damage to the neighbouring teeth and sometimes even form a cyst (sac of fluid) around themselves. If wisdom teeth come through in a hard-to-reach area, they will be difficult to clean and therefore more prone to tooth decay and gum disease around the tooth.

What do I do now?

Wisdom teeth should be regularly monitored by your dentist, resulting in an appropriate plan of action. Depending on the complexity, this may involve referral to an oral and maxillofacial surgeon.

Wisdom teeth can cause problems if left unchecked. It’s important to have regular check-ups so that your dentist can monitor them and make sure that all of your teeth are healthy.

Resources available at oralhealtheducation.adavb.org

REFERENCE:
Harradine, N. W., Pearson, M. H., & Toth, B. (1998). The effect of extraction of third molars on late lower incisor crowding: a randomized controlled trial. *Br J Orthod*, 25(2), 117-122.