

Who put the “Wisdom” in Wisdom Teeth?

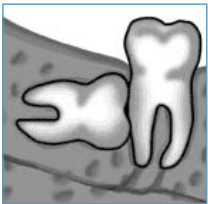
An erupted wisdom tooth.



Have you ever wondered how your wisdom teeth got their name? Are they really smarter than the rest of your teeth? Your wisdom teeth, or third molars, inherited their name because they are the last teeth in your mouth to develop and erupt. This eruption most often takes place during your late teen years, which has been referred to by some as the age of “wisdom” – hence the name wisdom teeth.



Wisdom teeth - once extremely useful - now serve little purpose. The reason for this is diet. As mankind evolved, so did our eating habits. Our diet once consisted of very coarse food, which caused teeth to abrade, or wear down, so significantly that they would take up less space in the jaw over time. Because the food was so difficult to chew, the jaw was forced to work harder, causing it to develop into a larger bone. These factors, in addition to the frequent loss of teeth at an early age, created more room in the mouth for wisdom teeth when they came in.



Today’s processed food and modern dentistry have decreased the amount of wear on teeth and early tooth loss, causing us to have too many teeth and not enough space in the jaw to accommodate them. This causes wisdom teeth to become “impacted” - abnormally positioned and unable to fully erupt.

There are three categories of wisdom teeth:

- Erupted: The wisdom teeth are fully erupted, aligned properly with your molars and do not indicate any need for removal.
- Partially Erupted: The wisdom teeth are positioned so that only a portion of the teeth is visible.
- Unerupted (Impacted): The wisdom teeth are trapped in the jawbone and unable to erupt.

Because of their positioning, erupted and partially erupted wisdom teeth are difficult to clean properly. Food debris that is left behind turns into plaque, which can eventually lead to tooth decay, gum disease and infection to your wisdom teeth, as well as their neighboring molars. In addition to these risks, impacted wisdom teeth can sometimes form a cyst that is capable of damaging the roots of the adjacent healthy teeth, the jawbone and nerves.

The best way to prevent future problems with your wisdom teeth is to visit your dentist on a regular basis. Yearly oral examinations and x-rays when necessary will help your dentist to determine if treatment is necessary.