

Wisdom teeth removal: Surgery, recovery, and what you can eat

April 25 2023, by Kirstie Ganobsik



Your dentist has delivered the bad news: You need wisdom teeth

removal surgery, a procedure that no one looks forward to having.

Curious about what to expect during and after the operation?

Experts offer some advice on why these "third molars" should be removed, what happens during surgery and recovery, and the best foods to eat after your [wisdom teeth](#) have been extracted.

Why would you need to have your wisdom teeth removed?

The [American Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons](#) (AAOMS) says that wisdom [teeth](#) typically come in between the ages of 17 and 25. They can cause symptoms like wisdom teeth pain; red, swollen or bleeding gums; bad breath; and trouble opening your mouth.

These extra molars may also crowd out your other teeth, be difficult to clean and become impacted, meaning they don't fully develop or push through the gums. All of this can cause a number of issues, including:

- Damage to nearby teeth
- Infections
- Loose teeth
- Receding gums and periodontal disease
- Tooth and bone loss
- Tooth decay (cavities)

Crooked teeth can also be an issue, according to Dr. [Louis Rafetto](#), past president of AAOMS.

"It's almost like musical chairs, where, you know, when you're a

kid...they stop playing music, and there's fewer chairs than there are kids to sit down. Well, with teeth, when the jaw stops growing, then that's the end of the room that's available for the teeth to erupt," he explained.

In addition to these issues, extreme pain, mouth cysts and bloodstream infections can develop for the approximately [90%](#) of people who have at least one impacted wisdom tooth.

The [AAOMS](#) states that it can be beneficial to have all your wisdom teeth removed as early as possible to help avoid these issues.

"I think it's really probably more appropriate to say once you reach the age of 18, you should seek an opinion that would include an X-ray image of the teeth so that an assessment can be made about whether or not [wisdom teeth] will eventually come into your mouth," Rafetto noted.

What happens with wisdom teeth removal surgery?

Your wisdom teeth removal surgery starts with an exam. The [AAOMS](#) explains that this helps your surgeon determine the position of your wisdom teeth, whether they're impacted and how far down the roots have developed.

Rafetto said that one of the reasons he recommends having this exam by age 18 is that the roots of your wisdom teeth aren't fully developed at that age, and the surrounding bone is less dense.

"You'd like to do that [surgery] before the roots are really long and gnarly—you want to remove the teeth at a time when the roots are typically half to two-thirds of the way complete in development," he said. "That way, they are easier to remove with better healing and less chance of any complications."

During the [surgery](#) itself, you'll either be given anesthesia or sedation for pain. Incisions will be made to move gum tissue away from impacted teeth and any bone covering the tooth will be extracted.

What is wisdom teeth removal recovery like?

After your wisdom teeth are removed, the tissue around your gums and sockets that previously held your teeth will be sensitive, according to [AAOMS](#). You may experience some pain in the area of the extraction, along with swelling and mild discomfort.

To avoid painful dry socket and other complications after wisdom teeth removal surgery, the AAOMS recommends:

- Eating a soft-food diet
- Avoiding smoking is critical, research published recently in [JAMA Network Open](#) warns
- Avoiding brushing the extraction area during the first 24 hours
- Using a manual toothbrush
- Taking all your prescribed medications on schedule
- Avoiding the use of straws for 24 to 48 hours after surgery
- Using only prescribed antibiotic mouthwash, and not over-the-counter varieties

Rafetto said that patients should also make it a priority to "keep ice applied over the side of the face where the teeth were removed as much as possible for the first 48 hours. That really keeps the swelling down to a minimum."

What can you eat after wisdom teeth removal?

Because harder foods like nuts, seeds and granola are off the table

during recovery, a lot of people wonder what to eat after wisdom teeth removal.

"People sometimes...go to just liquids like jello and pudding and apple sauce and things like that," said Rafetto. "I tend to point people in the direction of things like Italian foods and noodle-based or rice-based dishes, or things like omelets and breakfast foods like waffles and pancakes, things that don't require a lot of effort."

How long should this diet last?

"I would say, two days, and most of them are back to eating close to a normal diet and close to normal activities," he noted.

If you still have questions about your wisdom teeth, he suggested getting a dental evaluation. "We call that active surveillance, which basically just means don't ignore them!"

SOURCE: Louis Rafetto, DMD, oral surgeon, Wilmington, Del., past president, American Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons

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Citation: Wisdom teeth removal: Surgery, recovery, and what you can eat (2023, April 25)
retrieved 6 May 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-04-wisdom-teeth-surgery-recovery.html>

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