

Treatment for rare complication of wisdom tooth removal

November 11 2016, by Olivia Mccoy

When a patient has their wisdom teeth extracted, surgeons provide information about what to expect post-operatively, as well as potential complications that may occur from the surgery. For most patients, following the guidelines for proper care keeps these issues from arising. Unfortunately, that's not true for all patients; it certainly wasn't for Davina Leedy.

A wisdom tooth that wouldn't grow through the gums caused several infections, and ultimately the tooth had to be removed. A local oral surgeon performed her initial surgery but shortly after, Leedy realized something was amiss with her recovery. When Leedy went back to the doctor a week later, her lower jaw was still numb. When the numbness in her face eventually went away, it was replaced by excruciating pain in her lower chin and lip. "It hurt when the wind would blow or even when my hair would touch it [her face]," Leedy said. There was only one physician in the state of Kentucky who had the training to provide the treatment Leedy needed, Dr. Larry Cunningham, chief of the Division of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery at the University of Kentucky's College of Dentistry.

As Leedy eventually learned, the root of her wisdom tooth had been positioned so close to the nerve in her jaw that removing the tooth had disrupted the nerve, causing the numbness and then the pain she was experiencing. Initially the issue was treated with medications to try and relieve her pain, but these medications were only marginally helpful. In January 2016, Leedy required a more permanent and extensive fix:

neuroplasty and a graft of her inferior alveolar nerve. While Leedy worried about the procedure, she was thankful she was able to receive the care she needed in Lexington, just a short drive from her home. "As a mom of three boys, it was much better to just drive an hour and a half than to have to travel out of state."

The procedure Leedy needed was extensive and complicated. The injured nerve travels within the lower jaw bone. Therefore, the lower jaw bone needed to be cut in order to see the nerve and repair it. The injured portion of the nerve is removed and a nerve graft is placed in the defect. After the repair is completed, it can take several months before feeling comes back to the affected area. The procedure takes about four hours to complete. Thinking back on how complicated the procedure sounded, and was, Leedy said, "I'm amazed there's someone that has the knowledge to do something like this."

As Leedy's original physician pointed out to her, the issue she experienced is not very common. The doctor told her that in his 30 years practicing, her case was only the third time he'd seen this complication. According to Cunningham, "[nerve](#) injuries after dental work or dental extractions are uncommon and occur in less than 1 percent of wisdom tooth extractions." That explains why Leedy had no idea this complication could happen.

Since her procedure, Leedy has been pain free and has regained much of the feeling in her jaw. "The pain is gone, I can feel pressure in the area but it's way better than what it was," Leedy said. Leedy will continue to have post-op visits to check if there are any additional improvements; so far, it's a good sign the pain hasn't returned.

Provided by University of Kentucky

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