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"Doctor, everyone says I should get my wisdom teeth removed. Is it really necessary?"
Few questions create as much anxiety in a dental clinic as this one.

Mention "wisdom teeth" and most people immediately think of swollen cheeks, sleepless nights, difficult surgery and weeks of surviving on ice cream. The Internet is filled with conflicting advice, friends become instant experts and family members often insist that every wisdom tooth is destined for extraction. The reality is far less dramatic.

After 25 years in clinical practice, I have found that wisdom teeth are among the most misunderstood parts of the human body. Some remain healthy and functional throughout life, while others become a recurring source of pain, infection and damage to neighbouring teeth. The challenge lies not in removing every wisdom tooth, but in identifying the few that are likely to cause trouble.

WHY ARE THEY CALLED WISDOM TEETH?

Wisdom teeth are the last permanent teeth to emerge, usually between the ages of 17 and 25 — an age traditionally associated with maturity and wisdom.

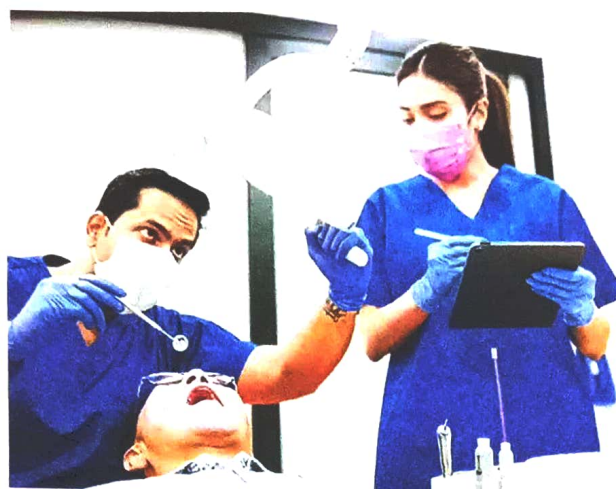
Anthropologists believe our ancestors relied on these extra molars because their coarse, unprocessed diet caused significant wear of the other teeth. Larger jaws also provided sufficient space for these additional molars.

Modern lifestyles have changed both our diets and, over generations, even the size of our jaws. Softer foods require less chewing, and many people simply do not have enough room for these late arrivals.

As a result, wisdom teeth often become impacted — unable to emerge normally because they are blocked by bone, gum tissue or neighbouring teeth. Impacted teeth can cause a plethora of issues ranging from pain, recurring infection, bad breath, cavity in neighbouring tooth, cheek bite and problems in the joint that opens the jaws (TM Joint).

WHEN A TOOTH HAS NOWHERE TO GO

Imagine trying to park a car in a space that is already occupied. That is essentially what happens with an impacted wisdom tooth. Instead of erupting vertically like the other teeth, it may remain trapped



PEARLS OF WISDOM

The third molars are not necessarily villains that need to be gotten rid of

beneath the gum, grow sideways or emerge only partially. This partial eruption creates the perfect hiding place for food particles and bacteria, making the area extremely difficult to clean. Often, the wisdom tooth itself is not the only casualty. The neighbouring second molar may also develop decay or gum disease because the area between the two teeth becomes almost impossible to keep clean.

MYTH-BUSTING: NOT EVERY WISDOM TOOTH NEEDS REMOVAL

One of the most persistent myths in dentistry is that every wisdom tooth should eventually be removed. That is simply not true. A wisdom tooth that has erupted fully, is correctly aligned, functions during chewing and can be cleaned effectively may never require extraction. Many people retain healthy wisdom teeth throughout their lives without experiencing any problems. Treatment should always be based on careful clinical examination and appropriate radiographic assessment — not on fear, family advice or social media. Removing a healthy, functional wisdom tooth without a valid clinical reason is rarely justified.

WARNING SIGNS

Wisdom teeth usually give warning before becoming a serious problem.

WHEN TO CONSULT YOUR DENTIST

Do not delay a professional evaluation if you experience

- ★ Persistent pain behind the last tooth
 - ★ Swelling around the gums
 - ★ Difficulty opening your mouth
 - ★ Repeated food lodgement
 - ★ Bad breath despite good oral hygiene
 - ★ Recurrent infections in the same area
 - ★ Pain in front of the ear
- Early diagnosis almost always leads to simpler treatment.

MYTH VS FACT

Myth: Every wisdom tooth should be removed.

Fact: Healthy, functional wisdom teeth often remain problem-free throughout life.

Myth: Wisdom teeth push the front teeth out of alignment.

Fact: Scientific evidence does not support wisdom teeth as the primary cause of crowding.

Myth: Wisdom tooth surgery is always painful.

Fact: Modern anaesthesia and contemporary surgical techniques make the procedure far more comfortable than most people expect.

Myth: Removing wisdom teeth affects the eyes.

Fact: Absolutely no scientific basis for this.

anxiety is not the tooth — it is the thought of surgery. The words "wisdom tooth surgery" can sound intimidating. Fortunately, modern dentistry has transformed the experience. Local anaesthesia effectively numbs the area, while contemporary surgical techniques minimise trauma to the surrounding tissues. Depending on the position of the tooth, treatment may involve either a straightforward extraction or a more complex surgical procedure. Usage of nitrous oxide sedation (laughing gas) can largely eliminate anxiety. In some cases, all wisdom teeth are removed together under general anaesthesia in a hospital-based setting. Some swelling, difficulty in mouth opening and discomfort are expected for a few days, but most patients recover much faster than they anticipate. In my experience, the anticipation is usually far worse than the procedure itself.

TIMING MATTERS

An equally important question is not only whether a wisdom tooth should be removed, but when. When extraction is genuinely indicated, performing the procedure before repeated infections or extensive damage occur often makes surgery easier

and recovery smoother. Younger patients generally heal more rapidly because the surrounding bone is less dense and the roots may not yet be fully developed. Waiting until severe infection, extensive decay or cyst formation develops often makes treatment considerably more complicated and expensive.

Early assessment does not necessarily mean early surgery. It simply allows informed planning.

CAN IMPACTED WISDOM TEETH SIMPLY BE OBSERVED?

Absolutely. Many impacted wisdom teeth remain completely symptom-free throughout life. If clinical examination and X-rays show no evidence of decay, infection, cyst formation, gum disease or damage to neighbouring teeth, careful observation is often the most appropriate approach. Maintaining good oral hygiene and regular dental check-ups allow the dentist to monitor any changes over time. Sometimes, the best treatment is simply keeping a close watch.

THE FINAL WORD

Wisdom teeth are nature's reminder that the human body continues to evolve long after childhood. For some people, they erupt normally and remain loyal companions for life. For others, they become unwanted guests that repeatedly cause discomfort and threaten neighbouring teeth. The decision to remove — or retain — a wisdom tooth should never be based on fear, hearsay or Internet folklore. It should be based on a thorough clinical examination, appropriate imaging and an informed discussion between patient and dentist.

After 25 years of practice, one lesson remains constant: dentistry is rarely about removing teeth. It is about preserving health. Sometimes that means saving a tooth. Sometimes it means removing one before it causes irreversible harm.

The real wisdom is not in removing every wisdom tooth — it is in knowing which ones deserve to stay.

Picture: iStock

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