

Make the wisest choice about those wisdom teeth

Interview by KIM GLOVER, R.D.H.

Most people have – or have had – wisdom teeth, also known as third molars. They are the last molars to grow into the mouth and are located behind the 12-year molars. We usually see these teeth come in between the ages of 16 and 22. Four wisdom teeth are typical but some people have none. I have also seen people with only one, two, three and six!

So why do so many people have wisdom teeth removed? Most of us do not have enough room in our mouths to keep the wisdom teeth and the surrounding gums healthy. You may wonder if your child will need to have any wisdom teeth removed someday. Your dentist will help you decide the best choice.

Some dentists remove teeth in

their office, but sometimes a dentist prefers to have an oral surgeon remove wisdom teeth – especially if the extraction is more complicated, or if multiple teeth need to be removed at the same appointment. Oral surgeons are specially trained dentists skilled in removing teeth, placing dental implants, and performing corrective surgeries for the face and jaw.

Antonio Caso, D.D.S. is an oral surgeon at Walla Walla Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery. I asked Dr. Caso to field some questions many parents have about wisdom teeth.

How do I know if my child needs to have wisdom teeth removed? A patient's dentist or orthodontist (if the child is



or has had orthodontic treatment, such as braces) will likely be evaluating the third molars during routine dental visits as a child enters his or her mid-teen years. The associated risks for removal of wisdom teeth are much less at a younger age when these molars are less developed and have shorter roots, so a preventive approach in the evaluation process is generally followed. Waiting until wisdom teeth cause pain or swelling may lead to more complications.

What can happen if wisdom teeth are not removed? Unhealthy wisdom teeth have been linked to many problems later in life. Wisdom teeth that are unable to erupt into a healthy position are exposed to the natural bacteria in our mouth and may become infected or cause inflammatory disease like periodontitis. Misaligned wisdom teeth have also been shown to cause damage and loss of the molars in front of the wisdom teeth.



Will my child need to be sedated to have the teeth removed? Anesthesia is not required for wisdom teeth removal, but most patients elect to have their wisdom teeth removed while they are comfortably and safely sedated. If there is any question on what type of anesthesia is best for a particular patient, discuss the options with the oral surgeon to determine the safest and most comfortable approach.

How long is the procedure and what is the expected recovery? The length of the procedure and recovery is partly determined by the age of the patient and the complexity of the procedure. Generally speaking, the earlier wisdom teeth are removed, the faster the recovery time and smaller the chance of complications. The actual procedure takes about an hour. In the few days following the procedure expect some soreness and swelling of the cheeks. Foods may need to be a bit softer to minimize discomfort while eating. Generally, younger patients can return to normal activity within a week. Patients older than 20 may require more recovery time. The oral surgeon will go over special instructions and precautions, as well as recommend medications to help in the recovery process.

Kim Glover is a Registered Dental Hygienist at Broadway Family Dental Care (www.bwaydental.com) in Milton-Freewater. You can find Dr. Antonio Caso online at www.wwoms.com.

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