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INDEPENDENT, OBJECTIVE AND EVIDENCE-BASED

## Wisdom teeth: Is it better to keep them or have them taken out?



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The wisdom teeth are the last and furthest back on each side of the upper and lower jaw. They are the third molar, and usually start to break through when people are between about 17 and 24 years of age. You can read more about wisdom teeth in our **Fact Sheet (URL: <http://www.informedhealthonline.org/index.214.en.html>)** .

When wisdom teeth are causing pain, infection or ulcers, or they are interfering with orthodontic treatment, people will often choose to have them removed. However orthodontists often advise young people to have wisdom teeth removed even when they are causing no symptoms. This includes those which have not erupted or broken through. They are called impacted or retained wisdom teeth.

The argument made for removing them is that the wisdom teeth could develop problems, cause harm to other teeth, or cause over-crowding and push on other teeth. Another argument is that wisdom teeth have no real function, and the sooner they are removed the better. But operations to remove the wisdom teeth can cause complications: almost every patient will have swelling and pain afterwards, and about one in 100 people (1%) may have permanent nerve damage, for example.

In order to find out what the consequences are of removing healthy impacted wisdom teeth, researchers from the Cochrane Collaboration looked for trials of this treatment and systematically analysed them. They found two trials with teenagers and young adults that compared whether or not it is better to remove healthy impacted wisdom teeth. In one trial, some of the people had their wisdom teeth removed and the others did not. While in the other trial, a wisdom tooth on one side of each person's mouth was removed, but not on the other.

The researchers concluded that these two trials are not enough to show whether it is better to remove healthy wisdom teeth or not. Whether removing wisdom teeth has any positive influence on developments with the other teeth could neither be proven nor disproven. The data showed however that removing the impacted wisdom teeth could not guarantee that the lower biting teeth (incisors) did not push on each other. Longer term studies are needed to see what happens years afterwards.

## Glossary

### Cochrane Collaboration

The Cochrane Collaboration is an international network of thousands of researchers and others. They work together in teams called Cochrane Review Groups to answer questions about health care by doing systematic reviews of evidence. To achieve this, the members of the Collaboration have developed systems and methods for systematically finding and analysing the results of trials of health care interventions. The goal of the Cochrane Collaboration is to help patients, health care practitioners and others make more informed decisions about health care. You can read more about the Cochrane Collaboration at their website.

### infection

In medicine, we speak of an infection when a person has caught a germ (an infectious agent). This germ can be a bacterium, a virus, a fungus or a worm. The germ multiplies and then either spreads throughout the body or only attacks one particular organ. As long as there are no signs of a disease, this is called an asymptomatic infection. When the body shows a reaction to the germ in the form of symptoms, this is called a symptomatic infection (an infectious disease). The period between the moment the germs enter the body and the moment the first symptoms of the disease appear, is called the incubation period. It may last a few hours or days, or even many years. An infection does not necessarily have to lead to the onset of a disease.

### wisdom teeth

The last and furthest back tooth at each end of each row of teeth is called a wisdom tooth. They are the third of the molars, and they usually start breaking through between the ages of 17 and 24. It is common, however, for a wisdom tooth not to come through at all, or to break through only partially. This can happen if there is not enough room in the jaw or other teeth are standing in the way. A wisdom tooth that has not broken through properly is called an impacted wisdom tooth.

## Sources

Mettes TG, Nienhuijs MEL, van der Sanden WJM, Verdonschot EH, Plasschaert AJM. Interventions for treating asymptomatic impacted wisdom teeth in adolescents and adults. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, Issue 2 of 2005. (Cochrane Database (URL: <http://www.mrw.interscience.wiley.com/cochrane/clsysrev/articles/CD003879/frame.html>) )

## **The German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG)**

The German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG) was established by legislation to provide evaluations of the effectiveness, quality and efficiency of healthcare services. This includes the assessment of medicines as well as the publication of health information for consumers and patients.

## **Evidence basis of our health information**

Our information is based primarily on systematic reviews of the effects of health care. Systematic reviews are necessary to gain an objective picture of health care. In order to do this, a clear question is formulated. Researchers then find all the relevant studies that could answer this question. They then evaluate those studies.

You can find a list of the evidence and other scientific literature on which this information is based at [www.informedhealthonline.org](http://www.informedhealthonline.org)

## **Disclaimer**

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