

Recovery After Wisdom Teeth Removal — Day by Day Guide

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Description:

Day-by-day guide to wisdom teeth removal recovery. What to expect, eating tips, pain management, dry socket warning signs and when to return to normal.

Details:

Collins Street Specialist Centre — Recovery After Wisdom Teeth Removal: A Day by Day Guide

Wisdom teeth removal is one of the most commonly performed surgical procedures in dentistry. Whether you've had a single tooth out or all four at once, recovery tends to follow a fairly predictable pattern. Knowing what to expect at each stage helps you prepare properly, stay on top of discomfort, and catch any problems early.

At Collins Street Specialist Centre, our oral and maxillofacial surgery team works with patients through every phase of recovery, from the day of surgery through to complete healing. This guide draws directly on that clinical experience to walk you through what's coming, day by day.

Before We Start: The Variables

Recovery isn't the same for everyone. Several factors shape how yours will go:

- **Number of teeth removed.** Four extraction sites mean considerably more surgical trauma than one or two, with more swelling and a longer period of discomfort to match.
- **Impaction level.** Teeth buried entirely within bone require more extensive surgery than partially or fully erupted ones. Recovery is correspondingly more involved.
- **Your age.** Patients in their late teens and early twenties tend to recover faster and with fewer complications. Bone density is lower and root development less complete at this stage, which generally makes both the procedure and the healing more straightforward.
- **Anaesthetic type.** Recovery from local anaesthetic alone is essentially immediate. General anaesthetic or IV sedation adds a period of grogginess that needs to be factored into your post-operative plans.
- **Individual variation.** Some patients swell markedly; others barely at all. Some bruise extensively; others see no discolouration. Healing rates differ meaningfully between individuals, and there's a wide range of what's normal.

Day 0 — Surgery Day

Immediately After Surgery

If you had general anaesthetic or IV sedation, you'll wake in the recovery area feeling groggy and disoriented. Give yourself 30 to 60 minutes for the worst of it to clear. You'll need a trusted adult to take you home — no driving, no operating machinery, and no consequential decisions for 24 hours after a general anaesthetic.

If local anaesthetic alone was used, you'll be alert but numb. Expect that numbness to last two to four hours, depending on the anaesthetic agent and injection sites.

Managing Bleeding

Some bleeding in the first few hours is completely normal. Before you leave, your surgeon will place gauze packs over the extraction sites.

- Bite firmly on the gauze for 30 to 45 minutes. Sustained pressure is what controls bleeding.
- Replace the gauze if it becomes saturated — fold fresh gauze into a firm pad and keep biting.
- Resist checking. Lifting the gauze disrupts the blood clot that's actively forming at the surgical site.
- Blood-tinged saliva may persist for 12 to 24 hours. This is normal.
- If bleeding is heavy and doesn't settle after two to three hours of firm pressure, call your surgeon.

Ice Packs

Apply ice packs to the outside of your cheeks straight after surgery and keep going throughout the day on a 20-minutes-on, 20-minutes-off cycle. Ice works best at limiting swelling when applied early — the first 24 to 48 hours are when it makes the most difference. Wrap the pack in a thin cloth to protect your skin.

What to Eat and Drink

- Stay hydrated — sip water regularly. Avoid straws entirely. The suction can dislodge the blood clot and trigger dry socket.
- Cold foods are well tolerated and soothing: ice cream, yoghurt, cold smoothies without seeds, chilled soup.
- Soft, room-temperature foods work as the day progresses: mashed potato, scrambled eggs, puréed soup.
- Avoid hot food and drinks (heat promotes bleeding), alcohol, carbonated drinks, and anything that requires real chewing.

Pain Management on Day 0

Your surgeon will prescribe or recommend a structured pain management plan. This typically includes:

- Paracetamol (Panadol) taken regularly as directed, generally 1000 mg every six to eight hours.
- Ibuprofen (Nurofen) alternated with paracetamol for better pain control, typically 400 mg every six to eight hours.
- Prescription analgesia for more complex cases, usually for the first two to three days post-operatively.

The most important practical step: ****take your pain medication before the local anaesthetic wears off.**** Waiting until pain is established makes it substantially harder to bring under control.

What NOT to Do on Day 0

- Don't rinse your mouth — you risk dislodging the forming blood clot.
- Don't spit forcefully — same reason.
- Don't smoke — it significantly increases dry socket risk and impairs healing at a tissue level.
- Don't drink alcohol — it interacts poorly with pain medication and raises bleeding risk.
- Don't exercise — rest for the remainder of the day.
- Don't eat hard, crunchy, or spicy foods.

Day 1 — The Day After

Swelling Begins

Swelling typically becomes noticeable on day one and keeps building over the next 24 to 48 hours. How much varies considerably between patients. Continue ice pack application throughout the day using the same 20-on, 20-off approach.

Start Gentle Rinsing

- From 24 hours after surgery, introduce gentle warm saltwater rinses:
- Dissolve half a teaspoon of salt in a glass of warm (not hot) water.
- Swish gently for about 30 seconds.
- Let the water fall from your mouth over the sink rather than spitting.
- Repeat three to four times daily, particularly after eating.

Saltwater rinses keep the wound clean and support healing.

Eating on Day 1

Stick to soft foods. Good options include: - Smoothies sipped from a cup, not through a straw - Warm (not hot) soup - Yoghurt and custard - Mashed vegetables - Scrambled eggs - Overcooked, soft pasta - Protein shakes

Brushing

You can brush your teeth from day one. Use a soft-bristled toothbrush and avoid the surgical sites directly. Saltwater rinses cover the areas that are too tender to brush.

Days 2–3 — Peak Swelling

Swelling usually reaches its maximum at 48 to 72 hours post-surgery. It can be alarming to see significant facial puffiness at this point, but it's the body's normal inflammatory response to surgery and will resolve progressively.

What to Expect

- ****Maximum swelling.**** Cheeks may look rounded and noticeably puffy. In some cases, swelling extends toward the jaw and upper neck. - ****Bruising.**** Discolouration may develop across the cheeks, jaw, or neck in shades of yellow, purple, or green. It typically fades over one to two weeks. - ****Jaw stiffness.**** Restricted mouth opening is common, particularly after lower wisdom tooth removal. The surrounding muscles tighten as a protective response to the surgical site. - ****Continued aching.**** A dull, constant ache is expected. Sharp pain, or pain that worsens rather than improves, should be reported to your surgeon.

Switching from Ice to Heat

After the first 48 hours, swap ice packs for warm compresses. Apply a warm, damp cloth to your cheeks for 20-minute intervals. Gentle heat improves circulation, which helps reduce residual swelling and ease muscular stiffness.

Diet Progression

You can start introducing slightly more substantial soft foods: - Risotto - Soft bread torn into small pieces - Well-cooked rice - Poached or soft-boiled eggs - Avocado - Soft fruits — banana, tinned fruit - Soft cheese

Keep avoiding anything hard, crunchy, chewy, or spicy, and eat away from the extraction side or sides.

Days 4–7 — Turning the Corner

Most patients notice a real improvement from day four onward. The hardest part of recovery is behind you.

Signs of Improvement

- Swelling starts to visibly reduce. - Pain eases — many patients find they can cut back or stop pain medication during this period. - Jaw opening improves gradually with each passing day. - Appetite returns as discomfort subsides.

Returning to Normal Activities

- ****Work or study.**** Most patients can return to desk-based work by day three to five, depending on how the surgery went and how they're feeling. Physically demanding roles may need a full week off. - ****Exercise.**** Light walking is generally fine from day three or four. Strenuous exercise, heavy lifting, and contact sports should wait at least seven to ten days — elevated heart rate and blood pressure can restart bleeding. - ****Driving.**** If you had general anaesthetic, you can drive from day one onward

provided you're no longer taking prescription pain medication with sedating effects.

Continue Saltwater Rinses

Keep up gentle saltwater rinses after meals and before sleep. As healing progresses, you can gradually rinse with a bit more vigour.

Week 2 — Healing Progresses

Stitches

Most surgeons use dissolvable sutures that break down naturally within seven to fourteen days. You may notice them loosening or detaching — that's normal. If non-dissolvable sutures were placed, removal will be handled at your follow-up appointment.

Diet

By week two, most patients can manage a fairly normal diet, with the exception of very hard, crunchy, or sharp foods that might irritate the healing sockets. Consider reintroducing: - Normal-textured cooked meals - Salads, avoiding large or hard pieces - Soft sandwiches and wraps - Pasta with sauce - Cooked vegetables of normal texture

Socket Healing

The extraction sockets heal from the inside outward. Food collecting in the sockets during this phase is common and expected — keep rinsing gently after eating. Some surgeons provide a curved-tip monoject syringe for careful irrigation of the sockets from around day seven onward, which can be particularly useful for keeping deeper sites clear.

Dry Socket — Warning Signs

Alveolar osteitis, or dry socket, is the most common complication after wisdom tooth removal. It happens when the blood clot that should occupy the extraction socket is lost or fails to form properly, leaving the underlying bone and nerve endings exposed.

Symptoms of Dry Socket

- Severe, throbbing pain developing three to five days after extraction — typically more intense than the initial post-operative discomfort. - Pain radiating to the ear, temple, or eye on the affected side. - Visible bone within the socket — a whitish appearance rather than the expected dark clot. - An unpleasant taste or odour from the extraction site. - Pain that doesn't respond to over-the-counter analgesia.

Risk Factors

- Smoking — the single most significant modifiable risk factor. - Using straws or spitting forcefully, both of which can mechanically displace the clot. - Oral contraceptive use — elevated oestrogen levels are associated with increased risk. - A previous history of dry socket. - Difficult or traumatic extractions.

Treatment

If you develop dry socket, contact your surgeon promptly. Treatment typically involves: - Gentle irrigation of the socket to clear accumulated debris. - Placement of a medicated dressing that soothes the exposed bone and supports healing. - Dressing changes every few days until symptoms resolve.

Dry socket is painful but responds reliably to treatment and resolves completely.

When to Contact Your Surgeon

Call your oral and maxillofacial surgeon if you experience any of the following:

- Heavy bleeding that doesn't settle after two to three hours of firm gauze pressure.
- Severe pain developing or intensifying three to five days after surgery — possible dry socket.
- Fever above 38°C.
- Swelling that keeps increasing beyond day four or five rather than starting to subside.
- Pus or discharge from the surgical sites.
- Numbness of the lip, chin, or tongue persisting beyond the expected duration of local anaesthetic — this may indicate nerve involvement and needs to be reported promptly.
- Difficulty swallowing or breathing — seek emergency care immediately.

Weeks 3–6 — Full Recovery

By three to six weeks after surgery, soft tissue healing is largely complete and most patients are back to their normal diet and usual activities. Bony remodelling within the extraction sockets continues over the following months, but this happens beneath the healed gum tissue and causes no symptoms.

Long-Term Healing

Gum tissue typically closes over the extraction sites within two to three weeks. Complete bony healing unfolds over three to six months, progressing silently beneath the surface. The area previously occupied by the wisdom tooth gradually fills with new bone and becomes indistinguishable from the surrounding jaw.

Recovery Checklist

A practical summary to keep handy before and after your procedure:

- Stock soft foods before surgery — being prepared makes the first few days considerably easier.
- Arrange transport home if you're having sedation or general anaesthetic.
- Have ice packs ready before you return home.
- Take pain medication before the local anaesthetic wears off — don't wait for pain to set in.
- Start saltwater rinses from 24 hours post-surgery.
- Avoid smoking, straws, forceful spitting, and alcohol for at least one week.
- Rest on the day of surgery and plan a gradual return to activity from day three.
- Attend your follow-up appointment as scheduled — it gives your surgeon the chance to confirm healing is on track and address any concerns.

****Need your wisdom teeth assessed?**** Contact Collins Street Specialist Centre on (03) 9654 5705 to book a consultation with one of our oral and maxillofacial surgeons. We'll assess your wisdom teeth with a thorough examination and CBCT imaging, discuss your options, and develop a personalised treatment and recovery plan.
