



An Inconvenient Tooth

Supernumerary teeth exceed the typical 32 teeth in a person's mouth.

It's a common problem in many aspects of life—lack of space, the trouble and inconvenience of how to fit what where. In dentistry, proper spacing of teeth may be an aesthetic issue, but it can also be a factor in one's oral health. Selective extractions—notably and commonly of wisdom teeth—along with orthodontics are well-known approaches to correcting simple spacing problems in an otherwise normal set of teeth, allowing room in the mouth for each tooth to grow healthy and straight. However, some dental spacing issues grow into more than mere inconveniences and beyond the scope of standard procedures. For those affected by a condition known as supernumerary teeth, this may be all too clear.

The ideal mouth contains 32 teeth: 16 uppers and 16 lowers. But, as the name implies, supernumerary teeth exceed the typical number, potentially appearing at any position in the dental arch. A supernumerary tooth may appear as a primary (baby) tooth, but more commonly develops later, as part of the permanent set. Affecting approximately 2 percent of the population, supernumerary teeth occur twice as often in men as in women and most often as anterior, or frontal, teeth.

As one might expect, the presence of supernumerary teeth often leads to problems with the eruption and spacing of normal permanent teeth, at times causing crowding and displacement. Extraction of the supernumerary tooth is recommended in these cases, but if the dental arch can accommodate the extra tooth, and the development of regular teeth is not impeded, removal may not be necessary.

Supernumerary teeth fall into two general categories—supplemental and rudimentary. Supplemental supernumerary teeth resemble normal teeth, and are in addition to the regular, 32-tooth series. Rudimentary supernumerary teeth usually appear underdeveloped and small, and are often pointed or cone-shaped.

The exact cause of supernumerary teeth is still subject to debate, but some theories include:

- Hyperactivity of the dental lamina, which causes an overabundance of tooth development
- Splitting of the tooth bud, which creates extra tooth development from the resulting buds
- Atavism, which is a regression to the dental forms of earlier stages in human evolution

Whatever the root cause, identifying and locating supernumerary teeth is very important to an individual's oral health. Generally, the emergence of a supernumerary tooth can be discovered through clinical examination by a dentist and standard X-rays. Once identified, the dentist and patient can decide on the best approach to take with this potentially "inconvenient tooth." 

For more information on supernumerary teeth or your oral health, please contact the Massachusetts Dental Society at (800) 342-8747 or visit www.massdental.org.

