

Do you need a hospital emergency department – or can your local doctor help?

It is important for people to be clear about the role of hospital emergency departments. They are designed to deal with serious emergencies such as road accidents or heart attacks as well as less urgent conditions. Knowing how hospital emergency departments work and what other services to use instead can reduce waiting times and help you get treated more quickly. Waiting times in emergency departments depend on how urgent your problem is – people with more serious problems have priority over people with less urgent conditions.

Where else can I go for advice or treatment?

A General Practitioner (GP) is usually the first person to see for your health needs. Many GPs work in medical centres which are open for long hours or even 24 hours a day. If you see a GP with non-urgent problems rather than an emergency department you will spend less time waiting for treatment, and you will help reduce the burden on hospital emergency services. Many areas also have a community health centre staffed by trained professionals providing a range of free services. For more information, contact your Community Health Centre (under C in the telephone book).

What happens when you arrive in an emergency department?

You will see the receptionist and the 'triage' nurse. You have the right to ask for an interpreter, and if you need one, let health staff know immediately.

The receptionist will ask you for

- your Medicare card (or Health Care Card if you have one)
- details like your name, address and the name of your doctor. This helps hospital staff access your previous medical history.

The triage nurse is a specially trained health professional whose job it is to sort casualties according to the urgency of treatment required. Like doctors, nurses in emergency departments are highly qualified health professionals with special training in emergency care. In some cases nurses will begin treating a patient before he or she sees a doctor.

If I come to the emergency department how long will I have to wait?

You can't make an appointment to see a doctor in a hospital emergency department. If someone sees the doctor more promptly than others who have been waiting longer, it's because their condition is more serious. Just because you come by ambulance doesn't always mean you'll be seen immediately – if there are others with more urgent problems. Other reasons why there may be a long wait include:

- Finding out all the information that is needed to make a full assessment of a patient's condition can take one to two hours. For example, you may need x-rays or tests to find out more about your condition.
- If you need to be admitted to hospital it may take several hours to organise a bed (but you'll be given good care during this time)

What should I do while I wait?

- If you're a patient, hospital staff may tell you not to eat or drink anything until you've seen the doctor. If you feel unwell or your condition changes (or if you feel better and want to leave), let the triage nurse know.
- Follow staff directions while visiting. By assisting staff, they will be able to provide the best possible care.

Please keep in mind that emergency departments are stressful places, and staff will be under pressure to help the most urgent cases first. Even if you feel anxious, as well as frustrated by the delays, aggressive behaviour towards emergency department staff, including violent attacks against nurses, will not be tolerated. Angry outbursts and disruptions caused by patients or relatives will only create more delays.

What happens when I leave the Emergency Department?

The hospital will give the patient a plan explaining about ongoing care, and when to see the doctor again. If a medical certificate or letter is needed about the patient's condition and treatment, ask the hospital before you leave.

If you need help making phone calls in English, ring the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on 131 450.

You can find more health information in your language on the Multicultural Communication website at <http://mhcs.health.nsw.gov.au>

Telephone numbers are correct at time of publication but are not continually updated. You may need to check the numbers in the telephone directory.