

# Understanding wait times



Frequently Asked Questions [www.ahs.ca/emergencywaittimes](http://www.ahs.ca/emergencywaittimes)

Alberta Health Services is working hard to improve emergency wait times while ensuring you get the care you need when you need it.

These frequently asked questions will help you understand the demand on emergency departments and how this demand is managed.

You can read more about what AHS is doing to bring ED wait-times down here: [Action on our Priorities](#)

## Why do you post these estimated wait times online?

The primary motivation for posting the emergency wait times online is to provide Albertans with another tool to aid in decision making about health care options.

Seeing the estimated wait time at any given site can help set expectations about possible waits when patients are seeking urgent and emergent care and to be able to plan accordingly.

This information also helps ensure patients are aware of options, including other nearby emergency departments or urgent care centres in Calgary and Edmonton Zones.

And, the information can help people plan, knowing how long their wait might be.

## Does the posted wait time indicate how long I will actually wait?

These are estimated wait times that indicate how long the average patient might expect to wait to see a physician.

It is important to note that more critical patients will always be seen before patients with more mild illness or injury. Critically ill or injured patients will always be seen quickly.

It is possible you will wait for less time than indicated. However, this is dependent on several factors, including staffing, the arrival of one or more serious trauma cases while you are waiting, or a high number of critically ill patients needing care at the same time.

## **Why are other people being seen before me?**

In emergency, the sickest patients will always be seen first. All Canadian emergency departments use the same standard triage tool to determine the seriousness of each patient's illness and care for them accordingly.

An emergency department is not "first come first served". It is imperative that patients with a more critical illness or injury are seen first.

## **Why are wait times always changing?**

Emergency demand can change quickly and significantly. An incident such as a serious trauma can unexpectedly and significantly impact wait time.

## **The wait time says 11 hours at my closest emergency department – why is the wait so long?**

It is important to remember that the wait time is an estimate – it is possible your wait will be shorter. Emergency department wait times are very fluid, and can fluctuate daily and hourly.

A spike in wait times could be caused by a number of factors, including:

- One or more major trauma cases that require significant staffing resources;
- A higher than normal number of patients who are critically ill or injured;
- Fewer staff working in the early morning hours;
- Staffing challenges (caused by illness, for example).

## **What if my condition isn't an emergency and I don't know where else to go?**

If your condition isn't an emergency, before you ever go to an Emergency Department you can consider other options. If your condition is not an immediate emergency you may have other options for care.

- » Call Health Link at 811 for advice on symptoms and care options, toll-free, 24 hours per day/7 days per week.
- » After hours clinics are available at some physician offices. Call Health Link at 811 for more information.
- » Walk-in clinics can provide care for less urgent concerns if you don't have a family doctor, or can't get in to see your doctor soon enough.
- » When you're not feeling well, waiting to be seen in an emergency department can be stressful and confusing.

Never leave the emergency department without first consulting with staff about the safety and appropriateness of other treatment options.

## **The online wait time said two hours and I've now been waiting three hours, why?**

Many factors can affect the pressures in emergency departments and those demands can change quickly and significantly. Online wait times are calculated through a software system, which analyzes information from within emergency departments and urgent care centres.

The system compares the number of people in the emergency department and how sick they are, with the staffing resources that have been scheduled for that time period in the department. The estimation does not account for unpredictable variables, such as unscheduled staff shortages or urgent traumas.

Wait times are designed to estimate how long the average, mid-acuity patient will wait, as these patients are the majority of those seen in emergency departments.

## **What does the online wait time represent?**

The online wait time reflects an estimate of how long it will take from the time you are assessed by a nurse at triage in the emergency department until you are seen by a physician.

The calculation does not aim to predict times for those patients with the most urgent needs (CTAS 1), as they will be seen immediately, or the least seriously ill or injured ones who may wait longer to be seen (CTAS 5).

## **How are wait times determined?**

The estimated wait time is determined by a software algorithm that looks at the number of people in the emergency department, and the number of doctors available to treat those patients.

This calculation does not take into account the most serious cases who will be seen immediately, and the least serious ones who may wait longer to be seen. Instead, the estimated wait time focuses on the typical wait time for the majority of emergency department visits.

It is important to remember that other health care providers in the emergency department may initiate assessments, tests and/or treatment while patients are waiting to see a physician.

## **How often are the online wait times updated?**

Online wait times are refreshed every two minutes.

## **Should I use the online wait times to determine where I should go?**

**In the case of a serious emergency always call 911 or go to your nearest emergency department.** The online wait time tool is meant to give the public general information about estimated emergency wait times.

## **Should I leave the emergency to go somewhere else?**

For health and safety reasons, you should NOT leave without consulting with the emergency department staff.