

Emergency department - what to expect

Every hospital with an emergency department aims to provide you with high quality care as efficiently as possible. In the emergency department, staff understand that being there is stressful and they take the best possible care of all of their patients. You will be treated as soon as possible, but someone who arrives in the emergency department after you may be seen before you if they need treatment more urgently.

Triage explained

Your treatment starts as soon as you step into the emergency department. On arrival, you see a specialist emergency nurse called the triage nurse. The triage nurse assesses how serious your condition is. In Australia, the triage system is used to guide hospital staff to see patients according to how sick they are. This system allows patients with life-threatening problems to be seen first.

In general, the triage system has five levels:

- **Level 1 – Immediate: life threatening**
- **Level 2 – Emergency: could become life threatening**
- **Level 3 – Urgent: not life threatening**
- **Level 4 – Semi-urgent: not life threatening**
- **Level 5 – Non-urgent: needs treatment when time permits.**

Waiting for treatment in the emergency department

After seeing the triage nurse, you may be asked to wait in the waiting room. How long you wait depends on how busy the department is at the time, and the number of patients whose conditions are more serious than yours. Sometimes the waiting area appears quiet, but this doesn't mean the emergency department is quiet.

The staff understand that waiting can be frustrating. They do their best to keep your wait to a minimum and make you comfortable. While you wait, if you feel your condition changes, let the triage nurse know.

Avoid food and drink

It is important that you don't eat or drink before being seen. You may need tests or procedures that require you not to eat or drink beforehand. Speak to the triage nurse if you have any questions about this.

Assessment and treatment

A staff member will call you into the department where they reassess your condition, ask some questions, examine you, and discuss your problem and any tests or treatments that might be required. Feel free to ask questions about your illness and your treatment at the time.

If your problem can be treated in the department, the emergency staff will treat it. They may also suggest treatment at home or by your local doctor. If your problem is more serious or requires special care, you may be admitted into the hospital.

Things to tell the emergency department staff

The emergency department staff may not be aware of your medical background, so they ask many questions. Sometimes, this needs to be done by more than one healthcare worker.

To help the staff to assess and treat you, tell them about:

- Any health problems you have had
- All drugs and treatments you are using
- Allergies
- Any recent trips overseas
- If you are pregnant or breastfeeding
- Any other facts they should know about.

Admission to hospital

The emergency staff will advise that you are to be admitted to hospital if they believe this is the best way to help you. As your admission is unplanned, it may take some time for a hospital bed to be ready. Sometimes, the emergency staff may need to transfer you to another hospital for your treatment. Until then, you are cared for in the emergency department.

Visitors to the emergency department

Having family or friends with you can ease the stress, so family and friends are welcome. They should feel free to help with your care. However, for safety reasons, only one or two visitors are allowed in the department at one time. The emergency staff may ask your visitors to leave during some procedures. Your visitors should also respect the privacy of others.

Code of behaviour

A code of behaviour exists to ensure a safe and friendly environment for patients, visitors and staff. No acts of violence, swearing, threats or verbal abuse towards another patient, relative or staff member are allowed. An initial warning is given, but if the behaviour carries on, the staff, security or the police will ask the person to leave.

Safeguard your valuables

It is best to ask a friend or relative to look after your valuables while you are being treated in the emergency department. Despite efforts by hospital staff, theft remains an issue. The hospital will only take responsibility for items that have been formally receipted for safekeeping in the safe.

Telephone issues

Enquiries about patients are welcome and can be made by phoning the hospital. One person should make the call and then inform other family members and friends. It is important to limit the number of calls because the department is busy and telephone calls take staff away from caring for patients.

Mobile phones must be turned off before going into the treatment area, as they may interfere with hospital equipment.

Going home

When you are discharged from the hospital, you are given advice about follow-up care. This may include:

- Instruction sheets
- Drugs or prescriptions
- Appointments for further tests
- Outpatient appointments
- A letter for your local doctor
- Certificates – please make sure that you have any medical certificates, Work Cover or Transport Accident Commission (TAC) certificates, and any other information that you need before leaving the hospital.

Making a complaint

If you or your relatives have any issues regarding your treatment, ask the nurse or doctor looking after you. Balancing the needs of everyone in an emergency department is a complex and delicate task. Sometimes, patients feel their needs may not have been fully met. If you have had an unsatisfactory experience, write a letter to the nurse unit manager, or call to make an appointment to discuss your concerns.

Where to get help

- In an emergency, always call triple zero (000)
- Your doctor
- Emergency department of your nearest hospital
- Triage nurse
- Nurse unit manager

Things to remember

- Someone who arrives in the emergency department after you may be seen before you if they need treatment more urgently.
- It is important that you don't eat or drink before being seen, because you may need tests or procedures that require you to fast (not to eat or drink) beforehand.
- Mobile phones must be turned off before going into the treatment area, as they may interfere with hospital equipment.

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Better Health Channel

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