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## Hospital emergency departments

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### Summary

- In a medical emergency, call triple zero (000).
  - Emergency departments aim to provide you with high-quality care.
  - Not all hospitals have an emergency department.
  - Some private hospitals have emergency departments, but you may have to pay for medical services not covered by Medicare.
  - Call NURSE-ON-CALL at any time, day or night on 1300 60 60 24 to talk about non-urgent health concerns.
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### Hospital emergency services

Most emergency departments care for all ages and patient types. However, a few provide specialist services, such as **The Royal Children's Hospital**, **Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital**, **The Royal Women's Hospital** and **Mercy Hospital for Women**.

Some private hospitals have emergency departments, but they may charge fees for medical services that may not be covered by Medicare. Some people have private health insurance to offset these fees. If you are not sure (and if you can), ask the triage nurse about costs when you arrive.

If the patient is seriously ill (for example, has collapsed, has chest pain or severe breathing problems, may be having a stroke or is seriously injured), call an ambulance. There are different factors that ambulance services need to consider before taking you to an emergency department, which may mean you are not able to choose which hospital you go to.

### Emergency triage system

In Australia, the triage system is used to prioritise patients according to how sick or injured they are. This system allows patients with more serious problems to be treated first.

### Things to tell emergency department staff

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

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

- the reason you came to the emergency department
- any health problems you have had in the past
- all medication and treatments you are using
- any allergies
- any recent trips overseas
- if you are pregnant or breastfeeding
- any other facts they should know about.

### What to expect in an emergency department

Your emergency care starts as soon as you arrive at the emergency department. A specialist emergency nurse, called the triage nurse, will assess your condition, provide first aid and prioritise you for treatment. 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 with conditions more serious than yours.

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Sometimes the waiting area appears quiet, but this doesn't mean the emergency department is not busy.

Staff members understand that waiting can be frustrating. They do their best to keep your wait to a minimum and make you comfortable. If your condition changes while you are waiting, 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.

#### **Emergency department assessment and treatment**

A staff member will take you to a treatment area where you will be re-assessed, examined and your problem will be discussed with you. The treating clinician will tell you about any tests or treatments that may be required. Feel free to ask questions about your condition and your treatment at any time.

If your problem may be able to be treated in the emergency department, after which you will be able to go home. The treating doctor 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.

#### **Admission to hospital**

The emergency staff will advise that admission 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 may be allowed in the treatment area 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 provide 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 continues, 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 hospital 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 emergency department is busy and telephone calls take staff away from caring for patients.

#### **Non-urgent medical options**

If you need help for an unexpected medical issue, there are other options that do not involve hospital emergency services. Your non-urgent and after-hours medical options include:

- visiting an after-hours medical clinic
- going to a pharmacy
- going to a supercare pharmacy that operates 24 hours a day, with a nursing service from 6pm-10pm
- calling a telephone helpline such as **NURSE-ON-CALL** for health advice
- making an appointment for an after-hours doctor to visit you at home.

#### **Where to get help.**

- In an emergency, always call triple zero (000)
- Your GP (doctor)
- Your pharmacist
- **NURSE-ON-CALL**, call 1300 60 60 24
- Australian Locum Medical Service (ALMS), call 13 26 60

**You might also be interested in:**

- **After-hours healthcare options**
- **Victorian supercare pharmacies**
- **Calling an ambulance**
- **Going to a hospital emergency department**

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