
Rural and regional healthcare

Summary

- Healthcare in country areas is provided by a range of public, private and not-for-profit services.
 - Your doctor will decide whether you should see a visiting specialist, go to an outpatient clinic, or travel to a regional or metropolitan service for treatment.
 - If you do need to travel for treatment, it is important that you put a plan in place.
 - Telehealth uses digital sound and vision technology to support long-distance healthcare.
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A range of public, private and not-for-profit services provide healthcare in rural and regional areas. These include:

- hospitals
- mental health services
- community health services
- bush nursing centres
- drug and alcohol services
- bush nursing hospitals
- ambulance services
- transport services
- aged care services.

The type of healthcare provided at these services varies depending on local demand, the availability of resources and the need to provide safe, high-quality healthcare.

Rural and regional healthcare

The rural and regional health system consists of:

- rural health services (smaller, more isolated communities)
- large rural health services (communities between a regional centre and an isolated rural setting)
- regional health services (major town centres and surrounds).

Rural health services

In rural health services, government-funded groups, local organisations and healthcare professionals work together to provide each community with accessible healthcare options.

Large rural health services

Healthcare in larger rural areas bridges the gap between the services delivered by smaller rural health services and those delivered in regional centres. Service delivery at larger rural health services often involves a range of more complex services than those provided at rural health care services.

Regional health services

Victoria's regional health services are located in Geelong, Ballarat, Bendigo, Shepparton, Albury/Wodonga and the Latrobe Valley. These regional hospital services have the resources to provide a broad range of healthcare including:

- emergency care
- mental health services

- obstetrics
- intensive care
- paediatrics
- geriatric care
- rehabilitation.

Challenges of rural and regional healthcare

Due to smaller populations, larger distances between towns and fewer technical resources, rural and regional health services face a number of different challenges from those located in the city.

Limited and shared resources between towns mean that not all medical services are available all the time. In a rural area, you may often have to wait until a specialist is in the area or travel to a regional or metropolitan hospital for more complex diagnosis and treatment.

Treatment usually begins with a visit to your local doctor, who will decide whether it is best for you to see a visiting specialist, go to an outpatient clinic, or travel to a regional or metropolitan service for treatment. In some cases where long distances are a problem, you may be treated with the help of telehealth, which uses technology to communicate between you and your healthcare professionals.

Finding a service nearby

Depending on your condition and treatment needs, you may be treated in a rural, regional or metropolitan hospital. Use the map of [Victoria](#) to see what services are available near you.

Transport and accommodation

Travel and accommodation are important considerations when you are travelling for medical treatment. If you need accommodation close to the hospital or help to plan or pay for your travel arrangements, support is available from a range of sources.

Victorian Patient Transport Assistance Scheme

The **Victorian Patient Transport Assistance Scheme (VPTAS)** helps pay your travel and accommodation costs when you have to travel more than 100 kilometres one way or average 500 kilometres travel per week (for one or more weeks) to receive specialist medical treatment.

The [VPTAS Guidelines](#) set out who is eligible, how much money you will get and how the scheme works.

Claim forms for the scheme are available from many medical clinics, rural and metropolitan hospitals, Department of Health & Human Services rural health regional offices, from the the [Department of Health & Human Services rural health website](#) or by contacting the VPTAS Office.

For further information or questions you can contact the VPTAS Office:

- Telephone: 1300 737 073
- [Email](#)
- [Website](#)

If you need help in a language other than English, please telephone VPTAS using the national Telephone Interpreter Service on:

- Immediate Phone Interpreting: 131 450
- Pre-booked Phone Interpreter Booking: 1300 655 081

Social workers

Social workers at regional and Melbourne hospitals are an important contact for those who have to travel for healthcare. Talk to a social worker to get helpful information, travel assistance and patient support. Social workers can also be an advocate for the needs of patients and families.

Travellers Aid Australia

betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Travellers Aid Australia provides trained volunteers to meet and accompany rural people on public transport to and from their health appointments in central Melbourne. The service is free and is available at Flinders Street Station and Southern Cross Station. Travellers Aid can be booked online or by calling 1300 700 399.

Travellers Aid:

- is available to rural, regional and metropolitan travellers
- must be booked in advance, with a minimum 48 hours' notice
- covers the public transport costs of its volunteers. You will still need to pay for your own ticket.

The service operates Monday to Friday from 8.00am – 6.00pm. You can request weekend or out-of-hours services, but this will depend on volunteer availability.

Travelling for treatment

If you need to travel for treatment, it is important that you plan your trip – from your transport and accommodation, right through to keeping your local doctor informed of your progress. Whether you are going to hospital as an in-patient or an outpatient, you can prepare yourself by answering some key questions.

Before you leave

Before leaving home, make sure you have:

- the address and phone number of the hospital or clinic
- details of your medical specialist
- personal identification information and your Medicare card
- a list of medication you are taking and any relevant test results
- your transport booked or your route planned out
- accommodation for you and your carer
- details of the country patient support officer or social worker at your destination hospital.

At the hospital

When you arrive at the hospital as an in-patient or outpatient, you may like to ask your doctor or nurse:

- How long will I have to wait?
- Do I need to book follow-up appointments?
- Who will tell my family about my treatment and progress?
- Who will inform my local doctor about my condition and progress?

Preparing for home

So that you are ready to return home, it might be good to ask the following questions before you are discharged from hospital:

- Who can help me when I get home?
- What information do my carers need?
- Is my transport still suitable for the journey home?
- What medication do I need?
- Do I need to book any follow-up visits?

Telehealth

Telehealth uses digital vision and sound technology to help healthcare professionals communicate with you over long distances. So if you are living in a rural location, you may be able to speak to your specialist doctor via your computer.

Telehealth is ideal for follow-up or review appointments. Speak to your doctor about whether this is a suitable option for your healthcare.

The **Royal Children's Hospital** has a telehealth clinic available for people in rural and regional areas. Appointments can be booked directly through your local doctor.

To access other telehealth services, discuss telehealth options with your GP.

Where to get help

- Your GP (doctor)
- Your nearest hospital

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

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