

# COVID-19 continues to impact public hospital emergency departments in 2020–21

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Presentations to public hospital emergency departments rebounded in 2020–21, following a decline in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to new information from the Australian Institute of

Health and Welfare (AIHW).

Information on Emergency department care in 2020–21 has been released with national, state and territory, local [hospital](#) network and hospital-specific data on the AIHW's MyHospitals platform.

"Following steady annual average growth of 3.2 percent between 2014–15 and 2018–19, and a dip of 1.4 percent in 2019–20, presentations to public hospital emergency departments increased by 6.9 percent in 2020–21. This brings the growth back on trend with the pre-pandemic years," said AIHW spokesperson Dr. Adrian Webster.

"There were 8.8 million presentations to Australian public hospital emergency departments in 2020–21, compared to 8.2 million presentations in 2019–20."

In 2020–21, 71 percent of patients were seen on time for their urgency category, down from 74 percent in 2019–20 but consistent with 2018–19 (71 percent). All patients in the most urgent category, "Resuscitation," were seen immediately.

Of patients in the second-most urgent category, "Emergency," 7 in 10 (71 percent) were seen within the required 10 minutes, down from 75 percent in 2018–19 and 2019–20.

Patients attending emergency departments in larger hospitals were seen on time less often than patients presenting to emergency departments in smaller hospitals.

The proportion of [emergency department patients](#) seen on time ranged from 48 percent in the Australian Capital Territory to 79 percent in New South Wales.

## **Impact of COVID-19 on emergency department activity**

"While emergency department presentations rebounded in 2020–21, the increase was in part due to fever clinics established to assess people who may be infected with COVID-19. In some cases, data recorded from these clinics was recorded as emergency department activity," Dr. Webster said.

In the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia, the average number of daily presentations to emergency departments fell substantially—at their lowest point emergency departments saw 16,200 presentations on average each day in the week beginning 30 March 2020, down from 26,000 daily presentations (on average) in the week beginning 9 March 2020.

However, by July 2020 there were 21,100 daily presentations (on average) to emergency departments, which increased to 25,700 presentations by the end of June 2021.

"There was also variation in presentations across the states and territories," Dr. Webster said.

"As Victoria experienced an increase in COVID-19 cases between June and September 2020, presentations to emergency departments in Victoria decreased overall by 0.7 percent in 2020–21.

"All other jurisdictions saw increases, ranging from 5.1 percent in New South Wales to 17.5 percent in Queensland."

In previous years, updates to Emergency department care and Elective surgery waiting times were released simultaneously. The data update to

elective surgery waiting times for 2020–21 will be released in January 2022.

Provided by Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW)

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