

Planning a country escape these school holidays? Four ways to avoid clogging up the emergency department

June 27 2024, by Katherine Riley and Rebekkah Middleton



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Winter school holidays are either here or coming up, depending on where in Australia you live. Maybe you're planning a [rural escape](#).

Rural tourism is crucial for job growth and sustainability of small rural towns. However, for rural emergency departments, [school holidays](#) are often the busiest times.

No-one plans a trip to the [emergency department](#) on holidays. But if you need health care, there are often other ways of accessing it than turning up at a rural hospital.

Here's why it's so important to leave rural emergency departments for life-threatening illness or injuries, and some other options for seeking care.

We're short of doctors and nurses

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [reports](#) a significant shortfall of [nurses](#) and specialist doctors in rural towns compared with staffing levels in big cities.

This means many small rural emergency departments only have nurses on staff, with doctors on call or consulted remotely from a larger hospital.

In a [study](#) published earlier this year, my colleagues and I discovered this dynamic was especially challenging for rural emergency nurses when critically ill patients presented.

One nurse told us:

"We need more staff. I mean, I look at these emergency TV shows, and you see them in Kings Cross at the big hospitals there or overseas, they get a [phone call](#) [...] there's a resus coming in. Everyone's standing around the bed with all their signs on, the airway/circulation/team leader [...] and here, we have two people. It's just so different. It's just a false

sense of reality. It's ridiculous."

So emergency departments should be used for [emergencies only](#). These include:

- sudden collapse
- chest pain or pressure lasting more than ten minutes
- breathing difficulty
- serious mental health condition
- uncontrollable bleeding.

When emergency departments are used responsibly, this can reduce the pressure on staff. It ensures the most seriously ill receive the care they need promptly.

What are my alternatives?

Here are four ways you and your family can be better prepared for your rural holiday and avoid an unnecessary visit to the emergency department.

1. Pack your scripts and medical history summary

Bring essential scripts and medications with you. This reduces the need to visit the local emergency department and ensures you have what you need during your stay.

Do you have a chronic condition or have had a recent illness or surgery? Make sure you speak to your GP before you go. They can provide a medical health summary that includes your recent treatments and medications. Alternatively, if you have access to [My Health Record](#), ask your GP to prepare a shared health summary and upload it to your

record. If you need [medical care](#), this summary will assist in a timely assessment.

2. Call Healthdirect, NURSE-ON-CALL or 13HEALTH depending on where you are

[Healthdirect](#) is a 24-hour telephone health advice line (known as NURSE-ON-CALL in Victoria or 13HEALTH in Queensland). By calling the relevant number, you will be connected to a [registered nurse](#) who will ask a series of questions and provide evidence-based advice and guidance. The Healthdirect website also offers an interactive [symptom checker](#) to advise whether you should see a GP, go to an emergency department, or manage your symptoms at home (or in this case, on holidays):

- [Healthdirect](#)—1800 022 222
- [NURSE-ON-CALL](#) (Vic)—1300 60 60 24
- [13HEALTH](#) (Qld)—13 43 25 84.

3. Need a GP? How about GP telehealth services?

For minor health concerns or non-urgent issues, [GP telehealth services](#) are a remote-access option that can be used when away from home. Before you go away, check with your GP to see if they offer a [telehealth service](#).

4. Go to an Urgent Care Clinic

The Australian government has funded the opening of [Urgent Care](#)

[Clinics](#) across the country. These clinics provide medical assessment and care for urgent illnesses or injuries. They have been created as a solution to divert people away from busy emergency departments. But these Urgent Care Clinics are not suitable for people experiencing emergency or life-threatening conditions.

Urgent Care Clinics are ideal for illnesses and injuries that would require urgent treatment such as gastroenteritis, minor infections, lacerations and back pain. Check [here](#) to find your closest clinic.

Please keep the emergency department for life-threatening illnesses or injuries, and if needed, call emergency services for an ambulance immediately.

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