

Emergency room waits getting longer

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Emergency room wait times in the United States are getting longer, especially for the severely ill, medical researchers said Tuesday.

A study from Harvard Medical School researchers at Cambridge Health Alliance said emergency room wait times increased 36 percent between 1997 and 2004.

The report, which analyzed the time between a patients arrival in the emergency department and when they were first seen by a doctor, found that the wait time increased the most for emergency patients suffering heart attacks. Those patients waited only 8 minutes in 1997, but 20 minutes in 2004. A quarter of heart attack victims in 2004 waited 50 minutes or more before seeing a doctor, Cambridge Health Alliance said in a release.

The number of emergency department visits increased from 93.4 million in 1994 to 110.2 million in 2004, while the number of hospitals operating 24-hour emergency departments decreased by 12 percent over that period.

"EDs close because, in our current payment system, emergency patients are money-losers for hospitals," lead author Dr. Andrew Wilper said in statement.

The findings were published in the journal Health Affairs.

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