



6.11 Emergency department care

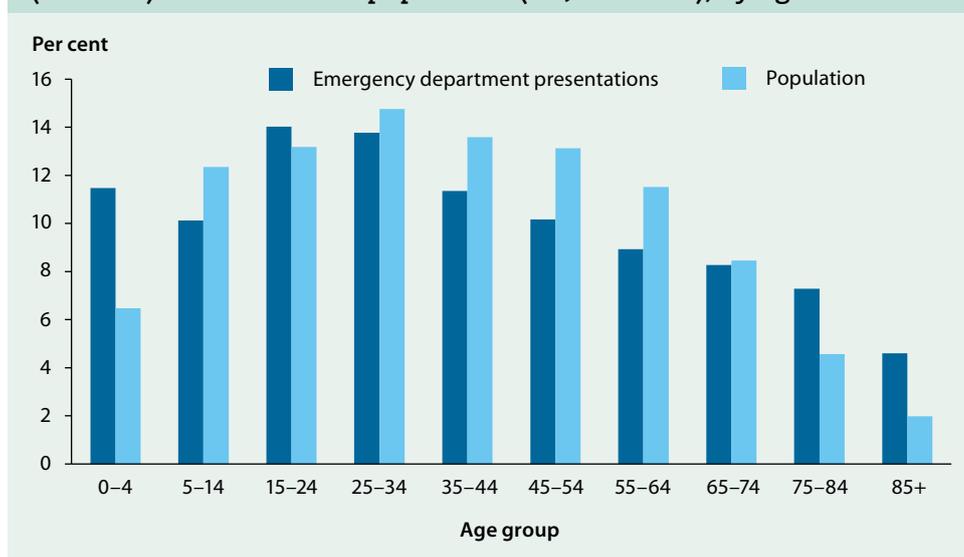
Emergency departments are a critical component of Australia's health care system, providing care for patients who require urgent medical attention.

Most larger public hospitals have an emergency department. Smaller public hospitals may not, but can provide emergency services through informal arrangements. The information presented here is about the 290 Australian public hospitals that have purpose-built emergency departments staffed 24 hours a day, which reported to the AIHW's National Non-Admitted Patient Emergency Department Care Database (NNAPEDCD).

How busy are emergency departments?

- In 2014–15, there were about 7.4 million presentations to emergency departments across Australia, equivalent to just over 20,000 presentations each day.
- Between 2010–11 and 2014–15, after adjusting for hospital coverage changes, the number of emergency department presentations increased by an average of 3.4% each year.
- In 2014–15, 51% of emergency department presentations were for men and boys.
- Children aged 0 to 4 years accounted for about 11% of presentations, despite comprising around 6.5% of the population. People aged 65 and over accounted for about 20% of all presentations, higher than the proportion of the population that this age group comprises (15%) (Figure 6.11.1).
- People aged 35 to 64 accounted for 30% of presentations, despite comprising around 38% of the population.

Figure 6.11.1: Proportion of emergency department presentations (2014–15) and Australian population (30 June 2015), by age





How and why were services accessed?

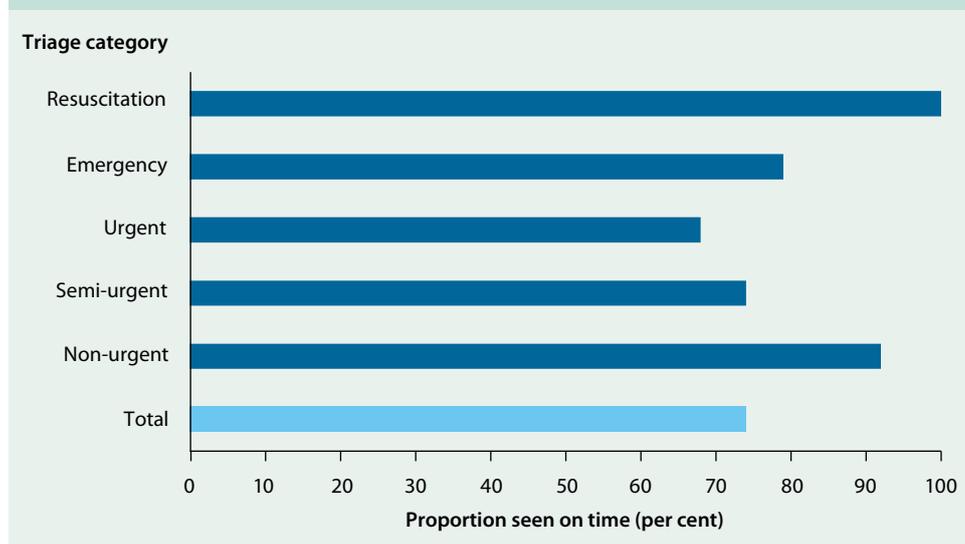
- In 2014–15, about 24% of all patients arrived by *Ambulance, air ambulance or helicopter rescue service*. About 84% of *Resuscitation* patients (who need to be treated immediately) arrived in this manner, compared with fewer than 4% of *Non-urgent* patients (who need to be treated within 2 hours).
- About 69% of patients presented to the emergency department between 8:00 am and 8:00 pm, and there were more presentations on the weekends and on Mondays than on other days of the week.
- About 27% of all emergency department presentations had a principal diagnosis (or main reason for care) of an injury or poisoning (over 1.8 million).
- About 30% of emergency department presentations ended in admission to the hospital.
- For patients who were subsequently admitted to hospital, the three most common principal diagnoses were *Abdominal and pelvic pain; Pain in throat and chest; and Pneumonia*.

Were patients seen on time?

Patients who present to the emergency department are 'triaged' on presentation, according to the urgency of their need for care. A patient is said to be 'seen on time' if the time between presentation at the emergency department and the commencement of their clinical care is within a specified time that is appropriate for their triage category.

In 2014–15, about 74% of patients were seen on time, including almost 100% of *Resuscitation* patients (who must be seen immediately, or within seconds) and 79% of *Emergency* patients (who must be seen within 10 minutes). For *Non-urgent* patients, the proportion seen on time (within 2 hours) was 92% (Figure 6.11.2)—higher than that for patients assessed as *Urgent* (to be seen within 30 minutes) and *Semi-urgent* (within 60 minutes).

Figure 6.11.2: Proportion of patients seen on time by triage category, 2014–15





- The proportion of patients seen on time ranged from 59% in the Australian Capital Territory to 81% in New South Wales.
- The proportion of all *Emergency* presentations that were seen on time increased from 70% in 2010–11 to 75% in 2013–14, and was 74% in 2014–15.

How long did people stay?

The length of stay in the emergency department is measured from the time the patient arrives to the time they physically leave to go home, are admitted to hospital or are transferred to another hospital. Between 2011–12 and 2014–15, the proportion of emergency department visits completed in 4 hours or less increased from 64% to 73%.

- In 2014–15, Western Australia had the highest proportion of visits completed in 4 hours or less (79%) and the Northern Territory had the lowest (62%).
- For the 30% of patients who were subsequently admitted to hospital in 2014–15, about 47% were admitted in 4 hours or less.
- Queensland had the highest proportion (57%) of emergency department patients admitted to hospital in 4 hours or less and the Northern Territory had the lowest (23%).

What is missing from the picture?

Because the scope of the Non-Admitted Patient Emergency Department Care National Minimum Data Set is limited to emergency departments that meet nationally agreed criteria, most of the information here relates to hospitals in *Major cities*. It therefore may not be representative of the emergency services provided by hospitals that do not have formal emergency departments (for example, those in more remote areas). For 2014–15, it is estimated that the proportion of emergency services reported to the NNAPEDCD was 88%.

It is not possible to determine whether the patient had been referred to the emergency department by another doctor or health service. It is also not possible to identify the admitted patient episode for those patients who are subsequently admitted. Linked data would enable the patient journey to be mapped on an individual level to understand how patients interact with the different components of the health system, and to monitor outcomes of care.

In 2014–15, principal diagnosis information was not reported uniformly, with a variety of classifications used, and it was only reported for about 94% of presentations. There was no information on the procedures or on other treatments provided in the emergency department.

Where do I go for more information?

More information on emergency department care in Australia is available at www.aihw.gov.au/hospitals. The report [Emergency department care 2014–15: Australian hospital statistics](#) is also available for free download.