



WAIT TIMES

What are Wait Times?

Wait times refer to the length of time it takes people to access health care services such as specialist services, diagnostics and treatment services.

Reducing wait times is a key concern of Canadians and their governments. It will require fundamental reforms and improvements in the operations of the health care system. Wait times are an important and complex matter that must be addressed through cooperative action among all levels of government and the health care community. We need to develop consensus on what an 'appropriate' wait time is and to better understand the impact of wait times on patients' health.

Shortening wait times requires having the right number and mix of professionals to more readily meet Canadians' needs. It also means delivering care in the most appropriate setting, improved information on wait times and wait list management, better management of chronic diseases, enhanced system efficiencies, and investments in longer term initiatives that foster sustained improvements in timely access to care.

Why is this important for renewal?

Canadians believe that access to essential health care services should be fair, and based on need and urgency. In recent years, however, wait times have grown longer for some services. This a concern because delays can mean extended periods of pain and anxiety, and Canadians worry that such delays may worsen their health. While improving waiting times is a priority on a human level, improved access to diagnostic and treatment services will also help to alleviate pressures elsewhere in the health system.

A national wait times strategy will create a system more responsive to Canadians' health care needs, establish appropriate waiting times for key health services and ensure that all Canadians have fair and reasonable access to services on the basis of need. Comparable reporting by jurisdictions on wait times and other aspects of health system performance will make the system more accountable and spur necessary reforms.

.../2

Benefits for Canadians

- Canadians and their families will have timely access to appropriate health care professionals and services.
- Canadians will be informed about appropriate waiting times for key health services.

Progress to Date

The 2004 federal budget confirmed an additional \$2 billion for the provinces and territories for health, bringing to \$36.8 billion the funding provided to support the 2003 Accord on Health Care Renewal. This funding in support of the Accord included \$1.5 billion for the acquisition of diagnostic and treatment equipment and training of specialized staff, building on the \$1 billion committed in 2000 for medical equipment. Federal investments also included \$16 billion to improve access to care through structural reforms in home care and primary health care, as well as catastrophic drug coverage.

Provincial governments are engaged in various initiatives to improve access to health services and better manage wait times, (registries, posting of wait times), develop wait times protocols (prioritization tools, targets) and undertake public education.

Health Canada and the four Western provinces are partners in the Western Canada Waiting List Project, a collaborative initiative of 20 partners that also includes regional health authorities, medical associations and research centres. The project developed and implemented prioritization tools in high-demand clinical areas. It is now adapting the tools for use in primary health care and developing maximum acceptable wait times for key procedures.

The federal government has made a “five in five” proposal, which aims to significantly reduce waiting times over five years in five key areas – cancer, heart, diagnostic imaging, joint replacement and sight restoration. These are the areas of most concern to Canadians.

Governments will use comparable indicators to report to the public on health system performance, including timely access, in November 2004. The Health Council, promised in the Health Accord and established in December 2003, has formed a Wait Times Committee and will report on wait times as one of the Council’s priorities. The information will give Canadians a fair and accurate picture of the situation regarding waiting times.