

MEDIA RELEASE

Statement on Emergency Department Pressures at Ontario Hospitals

January 17, 2024, Toronto, ON – “The respiratory virus season is upon us, and the emergency departments of Ontario’s hospitals are under sustained pressure as they work tirelessly to provide timely access to care for patients. As of November 2023, the average length of stay in emergency departments (for patients waiting to be admitted) across the province was the highest it has been in the last 12 months. Unfortunately, this reflects a historic seasonal pattern of increased demand for care that is being exacerbated by inadequate capacity across the health care system, and rampant respiratory illnesses circulating across Ontario during the winter months.

Wait times at emergency departments is a critical issue for both Ontario hospitals and patients requiring immediate care. This long-term, systemic problem is largely a consequence of staffing constraints, high numbers of patients in hospitals awaiting discharge to another, more appropriate level of care (ALC), and low acute care bed capacity in Ontario compared to other jurisdictions.

While Ontario’s hospitals are working closely with the Government of Ontario in increasing the number of health care workers and professionals, they are also continuing to provide care to increasing numbers of patients waiting in hospitals for other forms of care that are more appropriate and suitable to their needs. For example, as of late December, there were more than 4,200 ALC patients in acute care beds, with almost 40% waiting for a long-term care bed.

Growing wait times and high levels of hospital occupancy are also directly related to Ontario’s very rapidly changing population. A huge spike in population growth in recent years, and a growing population of elderly people with complex health needs is increasing demand for health services, alongside an increase in the acuity levels of patients presenting in emergency departments.

Ontario’s health system is facing the same pressures as other health systems across the country and the globe, especially during the winter season when respiratory illnesses are circulating.

As of January 13, there were 1,274 COVID-19 patients, 445 flu patients and 158 RSV patients receiving care at Ontario hospitals. Given this environment, the Ontario Hospital Association (OHA) strongly urges Ontarians to stay up to date on respiratory illness vaccinations, such as influenza, COVID-19, and RSV, as eligible. It is not only a means to protect the safety of families and communities, but also helps alleviate pressures that the health care system experiences during this time of year.

Ontario has approximately 22,000 acute care beds staffed and in operation at any given moment. In total, more than 6,000 of these beds are occupied by patients who should be in another more appropriate setting, or who, in some instances, may have been able to avoid admission had they been vaccinated against the seasonal respiratory viruses that continue to pose a threat to the health of many Ontarians, especially our most vulnerable.”

-Anthony Dale, President and CEO, Ontario Hospital Association

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Established in 1924, the OHA serves as the voice of the province's public hospitals, supporting them through advocacy, knowledge translation and member engagement, labour relations, and data and analytics with the goal of helping hospitals build a better health system. The OHA is also attuned to the broader strategic questions facing the future of the province's health care system and we work to ensure Ontario's hospitals have a voice in shaping this longer-term vision.

For more information:

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