

# About public outpatient services

## Frequently asked questions

### What are outpatient services?

Victoria's public hospitals provide services to patients needing specialist medical, paediatric, obstetric or surgical assessment and care. They also provide associated allied health services (such as physiotherapy) and diagnostic testing. These services are generally known as outpatient services, where a consultation or procedure is provided by a public hospital to a person who is not currently admitted to the hospital.

### How is an appointment made for an outpatient service?

Patients are referred to outpatient services from a general practitioner (GP) or another specialist. Sometimes patients are referred to outpatients for follow-up after treatment in the emergency department or after an inpatient episode.

Referrals can be made in a number of ways. For example, your GP may recommend a specialist assessment for a particular condition. Your GP will write a referral letter to an outpatient service provided at a public hospital. This referral letter will be to an individual specialist or a group of specialists. Your GP will post or fax the referral to the appropriate outpatient service.

Before allocating an appointment, outpatient services prioritise the referrals they receive based on clinical need. Individual health services have protocols and policies to make sure that patients are seen at outpatient services according to their clinical urgency.

GPs play a key role in this process and provide information to the health service in the referral letter about your clinical condition to allow the prioritisation of your appointment.

Once the outpatient service has your referral they will contact you and your doctor, to provide you with advice about your appointment.

### How long is my referral valid for?

**Referrals from GPs** are generally valid for 12 months from your first appointment.

**Referrals from a specialist** to another specialist are valid for 3 months from your first appointment.

### How will I be notified about my appointment?

You will receive a letter or a phone call from the outpatient service offering you an appointment. You may receive other letters relating to your appointment as necessary, for example some doctors may request that you have special tests completed prior to your initial appointment, such as X-rays or blood tests.

## How long should I expect to wait for an appointment?

Waiting times for appointments vary across specialties and health services.

If you are concerned about managing your condition until your appointment, you may wish to speak to the doctor who referred you and discuss the options available to you.

## What information will I receive from the outpatient service?

**Contact number:** You will receive a telephone number to call if you have any questions regarding your appointment.

**Patient identification number:** You may receive a designated a patient number depending on the health service. This number is individual to you. When you call the hospital always quote your patient number. This assists the staff to view your outpatient appointment history and answer your questions.

**A map** outlining transport options, parking and where to find the outpatient department.

Patients **Rights and Responsibilities** information

**Interpreter Information:** You will also receive information on interpreter booking and a number to call at the health service to book an interpreter. Please check your letter for a timeframe for making interpreter bookings as interpreters can be difficult to book at short notice.

## What do I do if my contact details change?

It is important that you ring or write to the outpatient service if you change your address or telephone number. This will ensure the outpatient service can continue to contact you.

## What can I do if my condition is getting worse?

If you have any concerns about changes in your condition or health prior to your appointment you should contact your GP for advice. Your GP is best placed to manage your health until you are seen at the hospital or to advise the health service if your condition is deteriorating.

Your GP may also be able to suggest some alternative treatment that may assist you while you are waiting to see a specialist at an outpatient department.

## What should I do if I require further information about anything related to outpatients?

You can contact the outpatient clinic staff through the hospital switch board or directly on the number listed on the letter you receive from the health service.

## How do I change my appointment?

If you need to change your appointment please contact the outpatient service as soon as possible. The contact details will be in the letter you received from the hospital. Staff will be able to move your appointment to a date or time more suitable for you, where appointment times are available.

Not attending your appointment may cause a delay in your treatment. Not notifying outpatients that you are unable to attend may prevent another patient being offered the appointment time. Please notify the outpatient department as soon as you are aware that you are unable to attend.

If you miss multiple appointments without notifying the outpatient department it may result in the necessity to obtain a new referral from your GP.

### **What can I do if I no longer need or want an outpatient appointment?**

If you no longer need your appointment please notify the hospital concerned.

You can help to reduce waiting times for other patients by making sure you let the clinic know if you can't attend the appointment.

### **What can I do if I have special needs?**

Hospitals are able to assist patients with special needs when attending outpatient appointments. If you are *hearing or visually impaired or need an interpreter*, it is important that you notify the outpatient service prior to your appointment so that assistance can be arranged for you.

## **Am I entitled to transport assistance?**

### **For rural Victorian patients**

The Victorian Patient Transport Assistance Scheme (VPTAS) aims to assist rural Victorians who are required to travel long distances from home to seek specialist medical or dental treatment from approved specialists. To be eligible for assistance patients must reside in a rural region and travel 100 kilometres or more one way, or an average of 500 kilometres per week for 5 weeks or more to receive treatment from a recognised specialist.

The VPTAS provides financial assistance for both travel and accommodation. However, it is not intended to be a full reimbursement scheme, rather it is designed to subsidise the cost incurred by rural Victorians required to travel to receive specialist treatment. To ensure assistance is provided where it is most needed, those patients who are eligible to claim assistance under other registered benefit organisations, including Department of Veteran's Affairs, are ineligible to claim under VPTAS as they are able to do so through the Department of Veteran's Affairs. Additionally VPTAS assistance does not apply for patient travel by ambulance, air ambulance or emergency support vehicles; the costs incurred by family members visiting patients at a treatment destination; nor other costs incurred at the treatment destination such as car parking and e-tag tickets.

## For local patients

If you require transport assistance please discuss with your GP the type of transport you require to take you to and from your appointment. There are many types of transport available, such as Red Cross, and community volunteers. Specialised transport assistance is provided for people who have a clinical need and is booked by the health service. Further information on non emergency clinic transport to outpatients is available from the Metropolitan Ambulance Service web site.

[www.mas.vic.gov.au/Main-home/What-We-Do/Non-Emergency-Services/Clinic-Transport-Services.html](http://www.mas.vic.gov.au/Main-home/What-We-Do/Non-Emergency-Services/Clinic-Transport-Services.html)

## What are the hours for outpatient services?

Most outpatient services are open Monday to Friday 8.30am to 4.30pm and are closed on public holidays.

Individual clinics run on a specific day and time of the week.

## What do I need to do before my appointment?

Before your appointment, please ensure that you:

- obtain any test results needed for your appointment
- make a list of any medications or dietary supplements that you take
- write down any questions that you may have for the doctor (it is often helpful to do this beforehand).

## What do I need to do on the appointment day?

On the day of your appointment please bring:

- the appointment letter you received from the outpatient clinic
- any relevant X-rays, scans (CT or ultrasound), blood tests or other test results
- the list of current medications you are taking
- your Medicare card, pension card (if you have one) and any other concession card you may hold (your Medicare card must be presented each time you attend a outpatient clinic)
- your GP's address and phone number
- any medication or dietary supplements you may *require during your visit* (many hospitals have cafes or snack machines on site, but you may like to bring your own food)
- a small toy or book for any children who are attending the clinic with you.

## Is car parking available?

Patient set down/pick-up zones are usually situated close-by. Health services will be able to give you information regarding parking and parking charges.

## What do I need to do on arrival at the outpatient department?

When you arrive, please go to the reception desk to check-in. Staff will check your details and may ask to see your Medicare or pension card. They will then direct you to the waiting area for your clinic.

## How long will my appointment take? Will I be seen by students?

It is important that you carefully read any letters you receive from the outpatient service about your appointment, and what items you need to bring to your appointment.

It is recommended that you allow up to two hours for your appointment. All patients are given a specific appointment time and the clinic is organised according to the number of staff at each clinic and the anticipated length of time that each patient may require. There may be more than one patient with a particular appointment time because there will be more than one staff member running the clinic at that time.

Although appointments are for a set time, delays can unexpectedly occur. The staff may be delayed by unexpectedly needing to discuss a complicated treatment or diagnosis with a patient, or occasionally staff may be urgently required elsewhere in the hospital. Should any such delays occur, you will be kept informed by the clinic staff. Another appointment can be arranged for you in the event that you are unable to wait for your appointment.

Plan to arrive 10 minutes before your allocated appointment to allow time to complete any paperwork that you may be asked to fill in, especially at your first visit.

Patients may be seen by a range of health care professionals including students from allied health, nursing and medicine who are in different stages of training. Public hospitals are teaching hospitals and it is intended that students interact with patients to increase their clinical knowledge. However it is the patient's right to refuse to be seen by a student.

Your doctor should introduce these staff to you. If you would prefer not to have additional staff present please let the doctor know. This will not affect your care in any way.

## Can I ask questions during my appointment?

During your assessment you may ask the doctor, nurse or allied health staff questions at any time. If you don't understand anything that is explained to you, please ask for it to be explained again.

## How do I get a medical certificate?

You should ask the doctor during the appointment for a medical certificate if you require one.

## What should I do if I have concerns about my outpatient appointment?

You can give your opinion about the care or the service you receive in any part of the hospital.

This may be in the form of a compliment or a complaint.

Each Victorian public hospital has a patient representative. This person is your contact if you have any concerns or compliments about the treatment you have received at the hospital. The patient representative will work with you to find a resolution to any complaint or, if necessary, investigate the matter further.

For details on your rights and responsibilities as a patient, please visit the Victorian Public Hospital Patient Charter website at:

[www.health.vic.gov.au/patientcharter/patient](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/patientcharter/patient)

Information about outpatient services is also available from individual health services on their websites. A list of health service websites is available on:

[www.health.vic.gov.au/hospitals/index](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/hospitals/index)

A range of initiatives have been undertaken jointly by the Department of Human Services and Victorian public health services as part of the Outpatients Improvement and Innovation Strategy. Staff from public health services and consumer focus groups have provided information about the consumer's experiences in Victorian public hospital outpatient settings.

Responses to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) have been developed to support the patients' experience and communication between outpatients, consumers and GP's. The responses have been developed by the Department of Human Services in consultation with representatives from a range of stakeholders including health services management, clinicians and consumers.

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