

Waiting Your Turn

Wait Times for Health Care in Canada, 2020 Report

by Bacchus Barua and Mackenzie Moir

Waiting for treatment has become a defining characteristic of Canadian health care. In order to document the queues for visits to specialists and for diagnostic and surgical procedures in the country, the Fraser Institute has—for over two decades—surveyed specialist physicians across 12 specialties and 10 provinces. This edition of *Waiting Your Turn* indicates that, overall, waiting times for medically necessary treatment have increased since last year. Specialist physicians surveyed report a median waiting time of 22.6 weeks between referral from a general practitioner and receipt of treatment—longer than the wait of 20.9 weeks reported in 2019. This year's wait time is the longest wait time recorded in this survey's history and is 143% longer than in 1993, when it was just 9.3 weeks.

There is a great deal of variation in the total waiting time faced by patients across the provinces. Ontario reports the shortest total wait—17.4 weeks—while Prince Edward Island reports the longest—46.5 weeks. There is also a great deal of variation among specialties. Patients wait longest between a GP referral and ophthalmic procedures (34.1 weeks), while those waiting for medical oncology begin treatment in 4.2 weeks.

The total wait time that patients face can be examined in two consecutive segments. [1] From referral by a general practitioner to consultation with a specialist. The waiting time in this segment increased from 10.1 weeks in 2019 to 10.5 weeks in 2020. This wait time is 184% longer than in 1993, when it was 3.7 weeks. The shortest waits for specialist consultations are in Quebec (7.9 weeks) while the longest occur in Prince Edward Island (27.2 weeks). [2] From the consultation with a specialist to the point at which the patient receives treatment. The waiting time in this segment increased from 10.8 weeks in 2019 to 12.1 weeks this year. This wait time is 116% longer than in 1993 when it was 5.6 weeks, and 4.3 weeks longer than what physicians consider to be clinically “reasonable” (7.8 weeks).

The shortest specialist-to-treatment waits are found in Ontario (8.7 weeks), while the longest are in Nova Scotia (30.1 weeks).

It is estimated that, across the 10 provinces, the total number of procedures for which people are waiting in 2020 is 1,224,198. This means that, assuming that each person waits for only one procedure, 3.2% of Canadians are waiting for treatment in 2020. The proportion of the population waiting for treatment varies from a low of 1.97% in Quebec to a high of 9.97% in Nova Scotia. It is important to note that physicians report that only about 12.39% of their patients are on a waiting list because they requested a delay or postponement.

Patients also experience significant waiting times for various diagnostic technologies across the provinces. This year, Canadians could expect to wait 5.4 weeks for a computed tomography (CT) scan, 11.1 weeks for a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan, and 3.5 weeks for an ultrasound.

Because of the difficulties in collecting data associated with the COVID-19 outbreak, the survey-collection window was

extended in this edition. Data were collected between January 7, 2020 and October 1, 2020. Despite this extension, this year's response rate was 11%, lower than in previous years. As a result, the findings in this report should be interpreted with caution.

Research has repeatedly indicated that wait times for medically necessary treatment are not benign inconveniences. Wait times can, and do, have serious consequences such as increased pain, suffering, and mental anguish. In certain instances, they can also result in poorer medical outcomes—transforming potentially reversible illnesses or injuries into chronic, irreversible conditions, or even permanent disabilities. In many instances, patients may also have to forgo their wages while they wait for treatment, resulting in an economic cost to the individuals themselves and the economy in general.

The results of this year's survey indicate that despite provincial strategies to reduce wait times and high levels of health expenditure, it is clear that patients in Canada continue to wait too long to receive medically necessary treatment.



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