



NEWS RELEASE

Canada’s health-care wait times hit 22.6 weeks in 2020—longest ever recorded

December 10, 2020
For immediate release

VANCOUVER—Canadian patients waited longer than ever this year for medical treatment, finds a new study released today by the Fraser Institute, an independent, non-partisan Canadian public policy think-tank.

The study, an annual survey of physicians from across Canada, reports a median wait time of 22.6 weeks—the longest ever recorded—and 143 per cent higher than the 9.3 weeks Canadians waited in 1993, when national estimates of the wait for medically necessary elective treatments were first calculated.

Before this year, the longest recorded median wait time was 21.2 weeks in 2017.

“Excessively long wait times remain a defining characteristic of Canada’s health-care system” said Bacchus Barua, associate director of the Fraser Institute’s Centre for Health Policy Studies and co-author of *Waiting Your Turn: Wait Times for Health Care in Canada, 2020*. “While this year’s reported wait times have been undoubtedly influenced by the ongoing pandemic, historical data suggests they are also the result of decades of policy inertia.”

The study examines the total wait time faced by patients across 12 medical specialties from referral by a general practitioner (i.e. family doctor) to consultation with a specialist, to when the patient ultimately receives treatment.

Among the provinces, Ontario recorded the shortest wait time at 17.4 weeks—up from 16 weeks in 2019. Prince Edward Island recorded the longest wait time in Canada at 46.5 weeks.

Among the various specialties, national wait times were longest between a referral by a GP and ophthalmology surgery (34.1 weeks) and shortest for medical oncology (4.2 weeks).

Crucially, physicians report that their patients are waiting more than four weeks longer for treatment (after seeing a specialist) than what they consider to be clinically reasonable.

This year, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the survey’s response rate, but more than one-in-ten physicians surveyed across the country still participated, with more than 1,200 responses. Further, almost three decades of pre-COVID data confirm that wait times in Canada are not just long but have gotten progressively worse.

“Long wait times aren’t simply minor inconveniences, they can result in increased suffering for patients, lost productivity at work, a decreased quality of life, and in the worst cases, disability or death,” Barua said.

“While combatting COVID-19 certainly requires our immediate attention, we should also work towards returning to a better-normal - with shorter wait times - once the pandemic is over.”

Median wait times by province (in weeks)

PROVINCE	2019	2020	PROVINCE	2019	2020
British Columbia	24.0	26.6	Quebec	16.3	18.8
Alberta	28.0	29.4	New Brunswick	39.7	41.3
Saskatchewan	26.0	21.7	Nova Scotia	33.3	43.8
Manitoba	32.4	23.7	P.E.I.	49.3	46.5

Ontario	16.0	17.4	Newfoundland and Labrador	23.4	29.2
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