

Osler aiming to help community prepare for medical care over the holidays

Like many other hospitals across the province at this time of year, William Osler Health System sees an increased number of people visiting its emergency departments (ED) at both the Brampton and Etobicoke sites.

In 2012, thousands of patients came through Osler EDs within two weeks over the holiday period, and it saw a 21 per cent increase in ED visits over its yearly average during this time.

"We started planning in January 2013 for this year's holiday surge," said Kiki Ferrari, executive director of clinical services at Osler.

"We wanted to ensure that we have a robust plan in place that is going to position us to provide safe, quality care over the holidays."

A holiday surge is caused by high demand and activity due to a number of factors: reduced hours of operation for doctor's offices and walk-in clinics, less availability of community resources, higher rates of health incidents caused by activities of the holiday season and, sometimes, an increase in seasonal flu cases. All of these factors cause the community to rely more heavily on hospital emergency departments.

To help raise awareness in the community about where patients might also be able to seek care for less complex conditions, Osler has taken to social media and its website to share tips and information. In addition to viewing a video explaining how the ED works, Osler website visitors can find out more about alternatives to the ED, how to prepare in case medical care is needed over the holidays and the symptoms that should prompt patients to go directly to the ED. This information is also being shared through Osler social media channels including Twitter (@OslerHealth) and its Facebook page.

"If we don't plan to meet demand during this time, we will see a ripple effect of people staying longer after the holidays," said Ferrari. "Through work with our local health partners to better understand care options in the community, bringing in extra staff to deal with the pressures, and updating our website with relevant information, we are doing everything we can to ensure that our patients and families are receiving timely, patient-inspired care in both of our EDs during this holiday season."

To find out more about how to prepare for any medical care over the holidays, go to www.williamoslerhs.ca and click on "Prepare for Care."

When to go to the emergency department

• Pains or tightness in the chest.

• Fractures or a broken bone.

• Wound that may need stitches.

• Severe pain.

• Shortness of breath.

• Sudden severe headaches, vision problems, sudden weakness, numbness and/or tingling in the face, arm or leg, trouble speaking, or dizziness.

• If your child is vomiting, has diarrhea and won't eat or drink.

• When a baby under six months has a fever higher than 37.9 degrees C or 100 degrees F.

You may not need the emergency department

For x-rays, laboratory testing or treatment, you may visit an urgent care centre or a walk-in clinic that offers these services. For minor problems, like coughs and colds, minor injuries and more long-standing or chronic medical problems, you can get care at a family care provider's office, an urgent care centre or a walk-in clinic.

And if you're not sure, call Telehealth Ontario at 1-866-797-0000.