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| Free public health care in Victoria for people fleeing the Israel-Palestine conflict |
| Interim guidance for Victorian health services – December 2023 |
| OFFICIAL |

**People fleeing the Israel-Palestine conflict who arrived in Australia on a visa subclass 600 (Visitor visa) will have free access to health services in Victoria. This is in line with existing asylum seeker and refugee health policies.**

# Background

In October 2023, the Commonwealth Government announced that it would support people fleeing the Israel-Palestine conflict to come to Australia. Numbers of people arriving in Victoria from the Israel-Palestine conflict are currently small but likely to increase.

In contrast to other refugee cohorts, most people fleeing the Israel-Palestine conflict will arrive on a Visitor visa (subclass 600) without access to Medicare, Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) subsidised medicines, settlement services or other basic Commonwealth safety nets.

# Healthcare for people fleeing the Israel-Palestine conflict

## Public hospital services

**People fleeing the Israel-Palestine conflict will receive full medical care in Victorian public hospitals as admitted, non-admitted or emergency patients.**

This is consistent with the arrangements outlined in the [Hospital access policy for people seeking asylum](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/publications/hospital-access-for-people-seeking-asylum) who are Medicare ineligible <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/publications/hospital-access-for-people-seeking-asylum>.

Their care includes, but is not limited to:

* emergency care
* elective care
* pathology and radiology
* mental health services
* pharmaceuticals (at co-payment rate and Tuberculosis medications free of charge).

**People fleeing the Israel-Palestine conflict should not be invoiced for care.**

Funding will be applied as per the usual emergency and general public patient arrangements. This cohort can be recorded as MF Public: ineligible asylum seeker.

## Access to other health services in Victoria

People fleeing the Israel-Palestine conflict will have access to fee waivers for a range of health services. This is consistent with the [*Guide to asylum seeker access to health and community services in Victoria*](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/populations/refugee-and-asylum-seeker-health-and-wellbeing) *<*https://www.health.vic.gov.au/populations/refugee-and-asylum-seeker-health-and-wellbeing>. This includes free access to:

* [**Ambulance services**](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/patient-care/ambulance-payment-responsibilities-authorisations-and-concessions) in emergency situations <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/patient-care/ambulance-payment-responsibilities-authorisations-and-concessions>.
* [**Community health services**](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/community-health/community-health-program-access-policy) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/community-health/community-health-program-access-policy>.
* [**Dental services**](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/dental-health/access-to-victorias-public-dental-care-services) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/dental-health/access-to-victorias-public-dental-care-services>.
* [**Catch-up immunisation**](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/immunisation/vaccination-for-special-risk-groups) for children and adults <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/immunisation/vaccination-for-special-risk-groups>.

People fleeing the Israel-Palestine conflict can also access a range of Victorian health services that **do not** require a Medicare Card. These include:

* **Victorian Virtual Emergency Department** <https://www.vved.org.au/patients/>provides 24/7 access to virtual care for people in Victoria, without a Medicare card. People can use any device connected to the internet to receive medical care from emergency doctors and nurses. The service is free, and interpreters are available.
* [**Priority Primary Care Centres**](https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/priority-primary-care-centres-ppccs#bhc-content) <<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/priority-primary-care-centres-ppccs#bhc-content>> are GP led services that provide care for people with conditions that require urgent attention but not an emergency response such as mild infections, fractures and burns. Care is free for people with or without a Medicare card. Costs may be required for imaging, pathology and other services.
* [**Supercare Pharmacies**](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/primary-care/victorian-supercare-pharmacies) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/primary-care/victorian-supercare-pharmacies> provide afterhours healthcare advice and treatment from pharmacists and nurses in locations across Victoria, including to people without a Medicare card.
* [**Maternal and Child Health Services**](https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/maternal-and-child-health-services) <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/maternal-and-child-health-services> is a free service which includes visits to a local Maternal and Child Health Nurse at 10 key ages and stages in your child’s development. Additional visits are offered as well as first time parenting groups, and links to local community activities and support services. Extra 24-hour telephone support is available from the Maternal and Child Health Line (Tel. [**13 22 29**](tel:132229)). Interpreters are available upon request.
* [**Early Parenting Centres**](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/maternal-child-health/early-parenting-centres) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/maternal-child-health/early-parenting-centres> provide free specialist support to families with children aged 0 and up to 4 years. They deliver flexible, targeted services that aim to enhance parent-child relationship, and support parents with strategies to achieve their parenting goals in areas such as sleep and settling, child behaviour, and parent and child health and wellbeing. Supports are provided to families regardless of Medicare status.
* **Mental Health & Wellbeing Hubs alongside Partners In Wellbeing** <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/mental-health-and-wellbeing-hubs> provide people in Victoria of any age, regardless of Medicare status, with support for a range of issues and include telehealth options.
* **Mental Health & Wellbeing Locals (‘Local Services’)** <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/mental-health-reform/local-adult-and-older-adult-mental-health-and-wellbeing-services> are for anyone aged 26 years and over experiencing mental health or wellbeing concerns, regardless of Medicare status. This includes anyone who is experiencing mental health and substance use concerns at the same time.

Note that this policy does not include free access to General Practitioners or private medical specialists, or any tests they order, as these services require eligibility to Medicare.

## Specialised refugee and asylum seeker health services

The following services will provide tailored support for people fleeing the Israel-Palestine conflict. Health services are encouraged to engage them for provision of additional support and information.

The statewide [**Refugee Health Program**](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/community-health/refugee-health-program%3e) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/community-health/refugee-health-program> provides early health assessment, referrals and health promotion and increases primary care capacity in refugee health. The program is delivered by community health services, and employs community health nurses, allied health professionals and assistants, and bicultural workers.

The [**Refugee Health Fellows Program**](https://refugeehealthnetwork.org.au/engage/refugee-health-fellows/) <https://refugeehealthnetwork.org.au/resource/refugee-health-fellows-program/> provides support to primary and specialist health service providers through direct specialist clinical services, telehealth support, education, capacity building, secondary consultation and outreach. The program is delivered through Royal Children’s Hospital, Royal Melbourne Hospital and Monash Health. It can also provide clinical advice, including on diagnosis, healthcare and appropriate referral options for people fleeing the Israel-Palestine conflict.

[**The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (Foundation House**](https://foundationhouse.org.au/)**)** <https://foundationhouse.org.au/> provides specialised counselling services and related supports to adults and children who have experienced torture, persecution or war-related trauma before their arrival in Australia.

People fleeing the Israel-Palestine conflict can also receive health and wellbeing support through the [**Support for Asylum Seekers initiative**](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/populations/refugee-and-asylum-seeker-health-and-wellbeing) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/populations/refugee-and-asylum-seeker-health-and-wellbeing>. Supports funded through this 2023-24 State Budget initiative include:

* general practice and financial assistance for pharmaceuticals and diagnostic testing in Community Health
* mental health support
* case coordination for people in crisis to connect people with essential services and supports
* basic needs and utilities assistance for essential expenses such as food, medication, and utilities
* homelessness assistance.

## Language services

Like all linguistically diverse patients, people fleeing the Israel-Palestine conflict should be offered an interpreter so that they can make informed decisions about their healthcare, as per the department’s [**Language Services Policy**](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/publications/language-services-policy) <www.health.vic.gov.au/publications/language-services-policy>. Family and community members should not be asked to interpret.

Translated resources can be accessed via [**Health Translations**](https://www.healthtranslations.vic.gov.au/) <https://www.healthtranslations.vic.gov.au/>.

# Evidentiary requirements

People fleeing the Israel-Palestine conflict will not have consistent forms of evidence confirming their status. The following are acceptable forms of evidence:

* photo identification / current visa / passport / travel documents that show evidence of arriving from the Israel-Palestine conflict with recent date stamp and/or
* a letter from a refugee health service confirming their status as a person fleeing the Israel-Palestine conflict.

If an individual or family is unable to show evidence of their immigration status, health services should exercise discretion in applying the policy based on health and social circumstances.

# Additional considerations prior to discharge

Health services are asked to consider the extenuating needs of people fleeing the Israel-Palestine conflict prior to discharge.

People fleeing the Israel-Palestine conflict in Victoria are predominately women and children. Many find themselves in urgent and distressing situations and were forced to leave family and friends behind in unsafe circumstances. It is likely they will be experiencing significant trauma and require mental health support.

Most people were unable to bring adequate possessions, including clothing, medicine, and infant and children’s supplies, and are now residing with family and community connections in Victoria.

Individuals and families may have a range of unidentified health care needs, including medication and diagnostic requirements related to chronic health conditions. Many people will need catch-up vaccinations, and influenza and COVID-19 vaccinations should also be offered.

Health services are encouraged to engage specialised refugee and asylum seeker health services above to assist with any of these additional needs.

# Sector coordination and advice

The [**Victorian Refugee Health Network**](https://refugeehealthnetwork.org.au/)<https://refugeehealthnetwork.org.au/> engages and coordinates refugee health and settlement organisations and advises government on the needs of refugee communities. The Network is hosting regular sector meetings to coordinate the health response for people fleeing the Israel-Palestine conflict in Victoria.

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