

## Frequently asked questions

### What are specialist clinics?

Victoria's public hospital specialist clinics provide access to medical, obstetric or surgical assessment and care by specialist doctors. They also provide associated allied health services (such as physiotherapy) and diagnostic testing. These services, which are sometimes referred to as 'outpatients', are for people who are not currently admitted to the hospital.

### How do I get an appointment at a specialist clinic?

Patients are referred to specialist clinics by general practitioners (GPs) or other specialist doctors. Sometimes patients are referred for follow-up after being treated in the emergency department or the hospital, or after having a baby.

Once the health service has your referral, the specialist clinic staff will prioritise your appointment based on the information the referring doctor has provided about your condition. You might receive an appointment date straight away or be placed on a waiting list to receive an appointment at a later date.

The specialist clinic will contact you and your doctor with information about the outcome of your referral.

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

You will receive a letter or telephone call from the specialist clinic offering you an appointment. You may also receive other letters relating to your appointment; for example some doctors may request that you have special tests completed prior to your appointment, such as X-rays or blood tests.

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

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

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

Waiting times for appointments vary across specialties and health services. If you are concerned about managing your condition while you wait for an appointment, you may wish to speak to the doctor who referred you and discuss the options available to you.

Your GP is usually the best person to manage your health until you are seen at the health service.

Please contact your GP if you are concerned about your condition. Your GP will advise the specialist clinic staff if your condition is deteriorating. In an emergency, you should dial 000 for an ambulance or attend an emergency department.

Your GP may be able to suggest treatments to assist you while you are waiting to see the specialist.

## What information will I receive from the specialist clinic?

**Clinic phone number:** You will receive a telephone number to call if you have any questions about your appointment.

**Patient identification number:** Depending on the health service you have been referred to, you may receive a designated patient number. When you call the hospital, you may be asked to quote this number. This helps staff view your appointment history and answer your questions.

**A map:** You will be provided with a map outlining transport options, parking, and where to find the specialist clinic.

**Patient's rights and responsibilities:** Information will be provided explaining your rights and your responsibilities as a patient attending a specialist clinic. This will include details about the privacy and confidentiality of your health information.

**Interpreter information:** You will receive information about the interpreter service and a number to call at the health service if you would like to arrange an interpreter. Staff will then book an interpreter for you. Please check your letter for a timeframe for making interpreter bookings as they can be difficult to book at short notice. There is no charge to you for using an interpreter.

## What if I have special needs?

Hospitals may be able to assist patients with special needs when attending their clinic appointments.

If you are hearing or visually impaired or need an interpreter, it is important that you notify the specialist clinic prior to your appointment so that assistance can be arranged for you.

## How do I change my appointment?

If you need to change your appointment please contact the specialist clinic as soon as possible. Staff will be able to move your appointment to a date or time more suitable to you, although this might mean a longer wait.

Please notify the clinic as soon as you are aware that you are unable to attend.

If you miss appointments without notifying the specialist clinic, you may have to start over by getting a new referral from your GP.

## What do I do if I no longer need or want my appointment?

If you no longer need your appointment, please notify the specialist clinic.

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

## Am I entitled to transport assistance?

### **For patients travelling from rural areas:**

The Victorian Patient Transport Assistance Scheme (VPTAS) assists rural Victorians who need to travel long distances from home for specialist medical or dental treatment from approved specialist doctors. 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 five weeks or more, to receive treatment from a recognised specialist.

The VPTAS provides some financial assistance for both travel and accommodation. While it subsidises these costs, it does not provide full reimbursement.

To ensure assistance is provided where it is most needed, patients who are eligible to claim assistance under other registered benefit organisations, including the Department of Veterans' Affairs, are ineligible to claim under VPTAS.

VPTAS assistance does not apply to:

- patient travel by road ambulance, air ambulance or emergency support vehicles
- the cost incurred by family members visiting patients at a treatment destination
- other costs incurred such as car parking or e-tags.

For information on how to contact your local VPTAS office, speak with your GP or visit the website at:

<http://www.health.vic.gov.au/ruralhealth/vptas/index.htm>

## **For local patients:**

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. If you require transport assistance please discuss with your GP the type of transport you require to take you to and from your appointment. Further information on non-emergency clinic transport is available on the Ambulance Victoria website at:

<http://www.ambulance.vic.gov.au/Ambulance-Victoria/Other-Services/Clinic-Transport-Services.html>

## **What are the hours for specialist clinics?**

Most specialist clinics are open Monday to Friday from 8.30 am to 4.30 pm and are closed on public holidays. Particular clinics may 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 have for the doctor (it is often helpful to do this beforehand).

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

On the day of your appointment, please bring:

- the appointment letter you received from the specialist 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, your pension card (if you have one) and any other concession cards you hold
- your GPs address and phone number
- any medication or dietary supplements you may require during your visit
- toys or books for children who are attending the clinic with you.

Many hospitals have cafes or snack machines on site, but you may like to bring your own food.

It is important that you carefully read any letters you receive from the specialist clinic about your appointment and the items you need to bring to your appointment.

## **Should I bring anyone with me to the specialist clinic appointment?**

You are welcome to bring a friend, relative or carer with you to the specialist clinic appointment.

If you need someone to care for you at home, it is important that your carer comes with you to the appointment.

If you are cared for in a nursing home, it is preferred that a member of the nursing home staff attends the specialist clinic appointment with you.

## **Is car parking available?**

Patient set down/pick-up zones are usually situated close to the specialist clinics. The health service will be able to give you information about car parking and parking charges.

## **What do I need to do when I arrive at the specialist clinic?**

When you arrive, please go to the reception check-in desk. 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?**

It is recommended that you allow up to two hours for your appointment. All patients are given a specific appointment time. There may be more than one patient with a particular appointment time because there will be more than one staff member working in the clinic at that time.

Although appointments are for a set time, delays can occur. The staff may be delayed by needing to discuss a complicated treatment or diagnosis with a patient, or they may be required urgently in other parts of 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 ten minutes before your allocated appointment to allow time to complete any necessary paperwork, especially at your first visit.

## **Will I be seen by students?**

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 their training. Public hospitals are teaching hospitals and it is intended that students interact with patients to increase their clinical knowledge. However it is your right to refuse to be seen by a student.

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

## **Can I ask questions during my appointment?**

If you don't understand anything that is discussed with you during your appointment, ask for it to be explained to you again. You may ask the doctor, nurse, or allied health staff questions at any time.

## **What if I need a medical certificate?**

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

## **How many times will I need to attend the specialist clinic?**

The number of appointments you will need will depend on the reason for your referral. Specialist clinic services are usually provided only for the amount of time that you need the expert care or opinion of a specialist doctor. The doctor you see in the clinic will discuss how many times you will need to attend the clinic.

You may be discharged back to the care of your GP or another community service when you no longer need to attend the specialist clinic.

A letter will be sent to your GP or other service provider about the care that you have received from the specialist clinic.

## **How long is my referral to the specialist clinic valid?**

Your referral to the specialist clinic may not be valid indefinitely, and the specialist clinic staff may ask you to go back to your GP or referring specialist to get your referral renewed.

## **What if I don't have a GP?**

All patients are encouraged to have a GP. While specialists deal with a specific aspect of your health, usually for a limited period of time, it is important to have someone who knows about all of your health needs.

The GP is usually the first person you see when you want help or advice about a health condition, and the person who will help you to manage your health when you either no longer need specialist care or are in-between visits to a specialist. This can be very important in helping you stay well and making sure any new health problems or complications are diagnosed and treated as early as possible.

## What should I do if I have concerns about the specialist clinic service?

You can give your opinion about the care or 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, and their name and telephone number can be provided to you by the health service. This person is your contact if you have any concerns or compliments about the treatment you 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:

<http://www.health.vic.gov.au/patientcharter/patient>

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

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

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

<http://www.health.vic.gov.au/hospitals/index>

A range of initiatives have been undertaken jointly by the Department of Health and Victorian public health services as part of the Specialist Clinics 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 specialist clinic settings.

Responses to frequently asked questions (FAQs) have been developed to improve patients' experiences and communication between specialist clinics, consumers, and GPs.

The responses were developed by the Department of Health in consultation with representatives from a range of stakeholders, including health service management, clinicians, and consumers.

For further information about specialist clinics please visit:

<http://www.health.vic.gov.au/outpatients>

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