

Wait times for elective surgery increasing during the pandemic in Australia

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Credit: Jafar Ahmed/Unsplash

New data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) shows the number of patients being treated from Australia's public hospital elective surgery waiting lists increased during 2020–21 as the

hospitals worked to clear a backlog left by COVID-19 suspensions the previous year.

"To ensure the health system maintained adequate capacity to manage the COVID-19 pandemic, non-urgent [elective surgery](#) was suspended nationally in March 2020. This reduced the [number](#) of elective surgeries performed in the [2019–20 reporting period](#) and contributed to creating a 'backlog' of surgeries that had been delayed," said AIHW spokesperson Dr. Adrian Webster.

"Nationally, there were 754,600 admissions to [hospital](#) from the public elective [surgery](#) waiting lists in 2020–21, up from 688,000 admissions in 2019–20 but slightly lower than the 758,000 admissions in 2018–19."

Information on [public hospital](#) elective surgery waiting times in 2020–21 has been released with national, state and territory, local hospital network and hospital-specific data on the AIHW's [MyHospitals](#) platform.

The data show that half (50%) of all public elective surgery waiting list patients were admitted for their procedures within 48 days (up from 39 days the previous year). The proportion of patients who waited longer than 365 days to be admitted was 7.6% in 2020–21 (up from 2.8% in the previous year).

Waiting times for most intended procedures increased between 2019–20 and 2020–21.

As seen in previous years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people tended to wait longer than other Australians for elective surgery, with a median wait time of 57 days, compared to 48 days for other Australians.

Alongside the increase in admissions to hospital from the waiting lists,

there was also an increase in the number of people being added to the waiting lists. There were 893,000 patients added to elective surgery waiting lists in 2020–21, up from 838,000 the previous year, and similar to the number added in 2018–19.

"While this release does not include information on the 2021–22 suspension of non-urgent elective surgery in some jurisdictions, it provides valuable insight into Australia's public hospital system. This, and the AIHW's ongoing monitoring, will contribute to the evidence-base and inform future decisions," Dr. Webster said.

Data on elective surgery waiting times for the period of 1 July 2021 to 30 June 2022 will be released in late 2022.

Provided by Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW)

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