Hospital emergency departments, also known as emergency rooms or “ERs,” provide people in your community with a place to receive life-saving care, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Emergency departments employ doctors and nurses with special training and skills to find out why you don’t feel well and to treat your illness or injuries.

However, many emergency departments across the United States are near the breaking point. This means they may not be able to respond effectively to sudden increases in the number of patients, such as those from multiple car crashes, or seasonal epidemics, such as the flu, or disasters, including acts of terrorism.

Some emergency departments today are overcrowded with patients who may wait hours to be treated. Partly this has been caused by a lack of capacity. More than 1,000 emergency departments have closed in the past decade. At the same time, the number of emergency department visits has increased to 107 million in 2001, up from 90 million in 1992.

Why Are Hospital Emergency Departments Overcrowded?

Hospital emergency departments are the only place in the health care system where people can go for medical help any time of the day or night. No one can be turned away; it’s the law.

More and more people are coming to emergency departments today. A large number of people who need emergency care are the elderly who often have complex illnesses, as well as people who are uninsured. People without health insurance often wait until they become very sick before turning to emergency departments for care.

Very sick patients often need to be admitted to the hospital, but if no beds are available, they have to wait in the emergency department until one opens up. This practice is known as “boarding.”

It can back up the emergency department and cause other patients to wait even longer for care. Boarding also may cause the hospital to divert ambulances to less crowded emergency departments. Unfortunately, hospitals today are facing financial difficulties, which means they may not be able to afford additional staff or beds to resolve the boarding problem.

Even though emergency departments are not designed to provide comfort to patients who must stay overnight or even for a couple days, the emergency staff will do everything possible to make your stay comfortable.

Why Are Some People Seen Sooner Than Others?

When you first arrive in the emergency department, a special triage nurse will see you right away. The nurse will ask you questions about your health problem and may take your temperature and check your blood pressure and pulse. This will determine whether you need to see a doctor immediately. Keep in mind, even though you may have arrived before another patient, if another patient is sicker, the doctor will take care of him or her first. If you are asked to wait and start to feel worse or have pain, tell the triage nurse right away.
What can I do to help solve the emergency department overcrowding crisis?

America’s hospitals and emergency departments need YOUR support to continue to meet your needs and serve the best interests of the community.

You can help solve the overcrowding problem by contacting your U.S. Representative and U.S. Senators and urging them to help hospitals solve this problem.

To contact your U.S. Representative or U.S. Senators, call the U.S. Capitol Switchboard at (202) 224-3121.

To find out how to contact your Representative look in the front of your local telephone book or visit: http://www.house.gov/writerep

Find out how to reach your two U.S. Senators by looking in the front of your local telephone book or visit: www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm

To learn more about these issues, visit the American College of Emergency Physicians’ Web site at www.ACEP.org

Why do some emergency department visits take so long?

You may be in the emergency department for many hours, especially if you or a loved one have a complicated health problem. Finding out what is making you sick may require many tests. The emergency physician may also need to talk with another specialist about your health problem to find out how to help you feel better.

It also may take several hours for the emergency department staff to stabilize you so that your health problem is no longer life-threatening.

If you have a serious illness or injury, such as a heart attack or stroke, you may need to be admitted to the hospital for ongoing care. Because of a lack of bed capacity, you may have to wait in the emergency department until a bed becomes available in the hospital. This may take hours and sometimes even a few days.