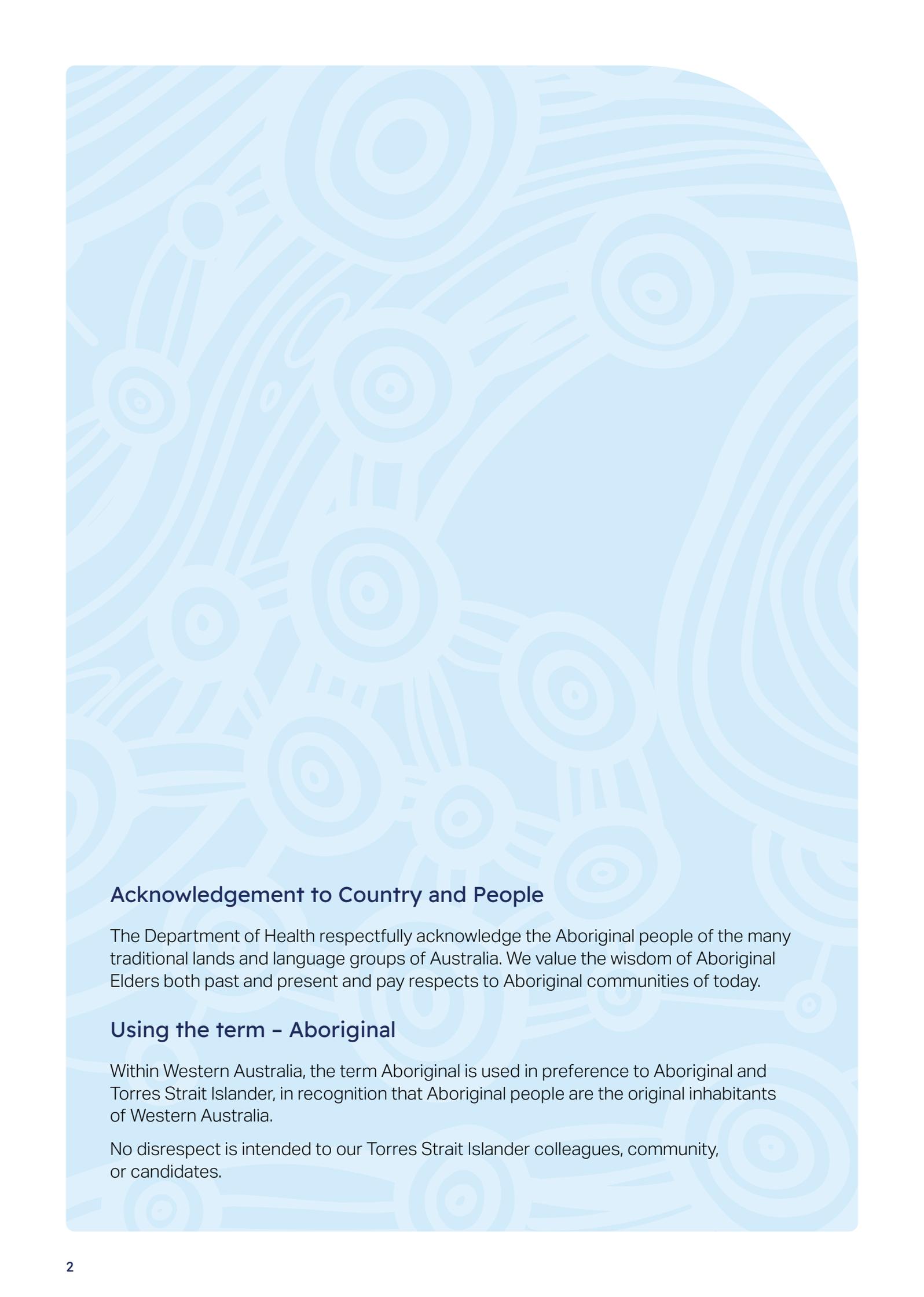




Government of Western Australia
Department of Health

Winter Strategy 2026





Acknowledgement to Country and People

The Department of Health respectfully acknowledge the Aboriginal people of the many traditional lands and language groups of Australia. We value the wisdom of Aboriginal Elders both past and present and pay respects to Aboriginal communities of today.

Using the term – Aboriginal

Within Western Australia, the term Aboriginal is used in preference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, in recognition that Aboriginal people are the original inhabitants of Western Australia.

No disrespect is intended to our Torres Strait Islander colleagues, community, or candidates.

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Our commitment to winter safety

We all have an important role to play in keeping Western Australians healthy and safe this winter.

Winter 2025 was one of the toughest for Western Australia's health system, with more severe flu-like illnesses and higher demand across hospitals and community services.

We're committed to keeping Western Australians healthy and safe this winter by:

- preparing our health system early and working together
- reducing the impact of seasonal illness
- supporting people to stay well and recover at home
- keeping patients moving through our hospitals
- supporting our hospital staff
- educating people to know where to go when they're sick, so they can get the right care first time - whether that's a GP, urgent care clinic, pharmacy or emergency department
- promoting vaccination as the most powerful step we can take together.

When more of us get vaccinated, we protect each other, ease pressure on emergency departments, and keep care available for those who need it most.

If we all play our part, we can create better health outcomes for everyone.



Winter brings extra pressure on our health system

Each winter, demand rises with more respiratory illness, chronic conditions, and greater workforce pressures. Our emergency departments are seeing more patients who are older, sicker, and have complex health needs, reflecting the impact of an ageing population.

On average, more than 300 people remain in hospital due to a shortage of available aged care services – a sector overseen nationally rather than by states.

Last year we saw almost 1.2 million emergency department visits and 700,000 public hospital admissions.

This strategy sets out what WA Health is doing to prepare for 2026, learning from previous years to ensure everyone can get the care they need, when they need it.

We're working closely with St John WA, the Mental Health Commission, aged care and community partners so we can respond quickly and safely when demand increases.

Together, these efforts will help us keep care flowing and protect the safety of Western Australians during the busiest months of the year.



Investments and actions

The State Government is investing over **\$140 million** to prepare our health system for the winter season.



Key initiatives include:

\$61.2M



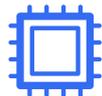
to increase bed capacity

\$14M



for free flu vaccinations including new FluMist nasal vaccines for children

\$700,000



for AI to improve patient flow

\$3.2M



for quicker influenza-like illness testing in EDs

\$5.7M



to streamline patient discharge processes

\$4.1M



to extend St John Ambulance WA Extended Care Paramedics

\$24.2M



to increase 'Time to Think' aged care bed capacity

\$20.3M



to pilot 24/7 monitoring and response for older people returning home after a hospital stay

\$1.1M



to expand Hospital in the Home into aged care

\$6.9M



for targeted public messaging

Getting prepared

Preparation, partnership and shared responsibility will lessen the impact of seasonal illness and support better outcomes for every one of us.

We're getting ready for winter by:

- providing better testing of influenza-like illness for patients presenting at our hospitals
- extending the trial of extended care paramedics who deliver advanced clinical care in a patient's home
- ensuring more Western Australians can access hospital-level care in the comfort of their own home as part of our Hospital in the Home program
- transitioning Mount Lawley Private Hospital into public hands over the next six months, providing extra beds and operating theatres for public patients.
- providing dedicated coordinators within our hospitals, supporting older people in residential care to have access to Hospital in the Home
- expanding the number of beds known as Time to Think beds so older people can safely leave hospital while they consider their next steps
- standardising emergency department processes to make it quicker for paramedics to handover patients.

Our focus

This winter, we're concentrating on the things that will make the biggest difference:

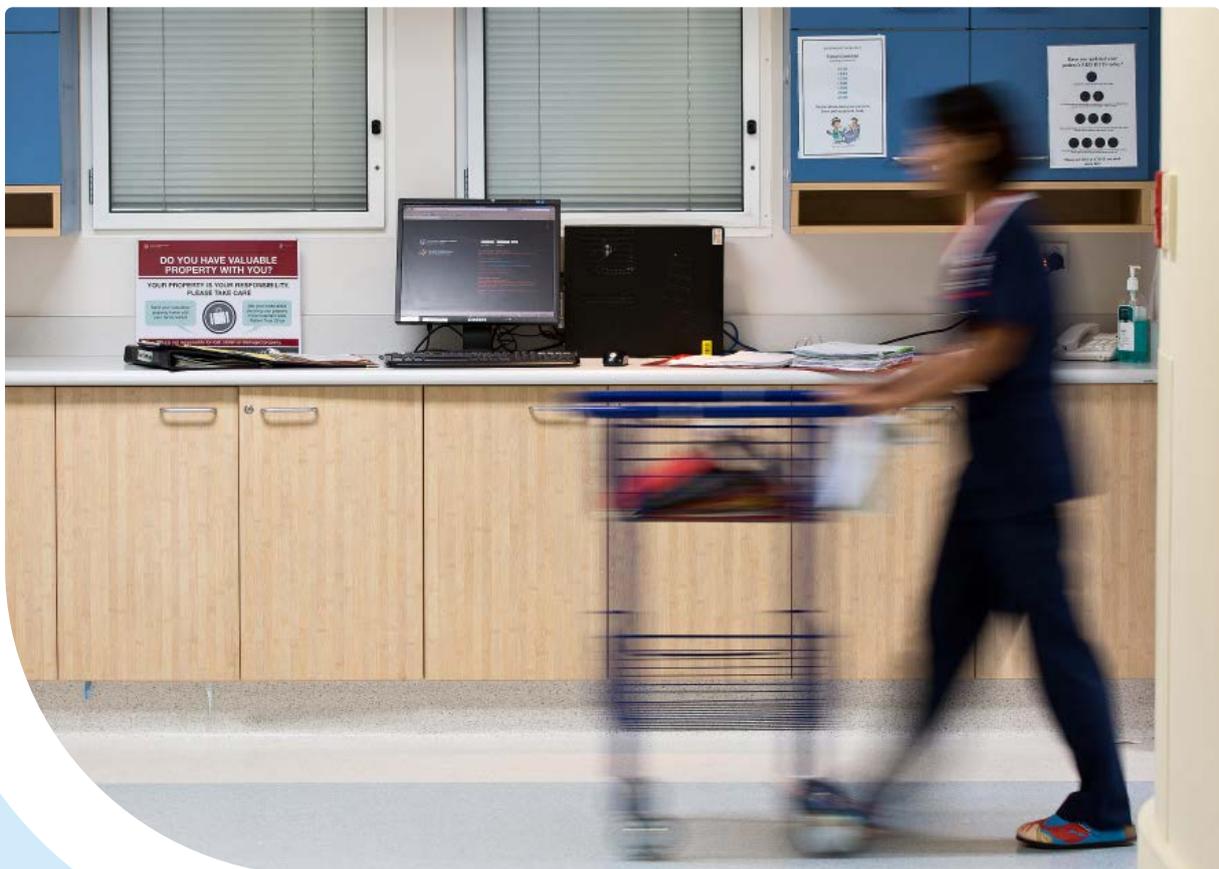
- **Prevention** – keeping Western Australians healthy and informed through vaccination and education, helping people stay well and easing pressure on our hospitals
- **Patient flow** – improving processes so that patient care happens quickly and safely
- **Bed capacity** – expanding bed capacity to meet rising demand, by investing in new beds, virtual initiatives, innovative programs and partnerships
- **Caring for older people** – working with aged care providers to deliver the right care, in the right place, at the right time, and supporting older people to recover at home, therefore reducing unnecessary hospital stays
- **Supporting our workforce** – strengthening clinical coverage and support to meet high demand
- **Education** – ensuring people understand the range of healthcare options available depending on the medical care they need.

Prevention

Keeping Western Australians healthy starts with prevention. By raising awareness of how to stay healthy, we reduce pressure on hospitals. We'll help the community protect against respiratory illness and know where to seek care. We'll also support our health workforce to stay well.

We'll improve prevention by:

- offering free flu vaccines for the WA community
- making it easier for families by expanding the role of pharmacists to give vaccines to children as young as 2 years old
- introducing a free needle-free nasal spray flu vaccine, FluMist, for children aged 2 to 11 years
- expanding access to respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) vaccination
- expanding access to flu vaccination for hospital staff, including shift workers after hours
- providing clear guidance to ensure Western Australians understand when and where to seek care
- supporting the community and health workforce to stay well through targeted and easy to understand messaging.



Patient flow

We're improving how hospitals and services work together, to deliver safer and more efficient care so we can help patients return home and recover sooner.

By coordinating better and acting faster, we can reduce waiting times and prevent overcrowding.

We'll improve patient flow by:

- providing clear escalation pathways for safe, timely care during periods of peak pressure
- elevating the 24/7 service of the State Health Operations Centre with live data to track bed availability, patient numbers and optimise ambulance allocation
- growing virtual healthcare through the WA Virtual Emergency Department, to see more complex cases and link with services like healthdirect and the new GP ASK service
- daily collaboration between hospital and State Health Operations Centre staff for faster, coordinated decisions
- recruiting additional clinical and support staff in hospitals
- increasing mobile radiology for in-home tests and treatment
- using AI to boost hospital efficiency and improve bed availability
- continuing the Ambulance Mental Health Co-response, a mobile response team for people in crisis so they can be cared for safely in the community
- using rapid testing to diagnose flu-like illness
- boosting the capacity of frontline paramedics to provide more medical care in the community by funding specially trained extended care paramedics for a further 2 years
- supporting weekend and same day discharges, so patients can go home as soon as they are ready.

Ambulance ramping

When beds in our hospital wards are full, our emergency departments are unable to move new patients through the system quickly.

Our ambulance workers, paramedics and ED clinicians stay with patients at all times, and patients with life-threatening conditions are seen immediately.

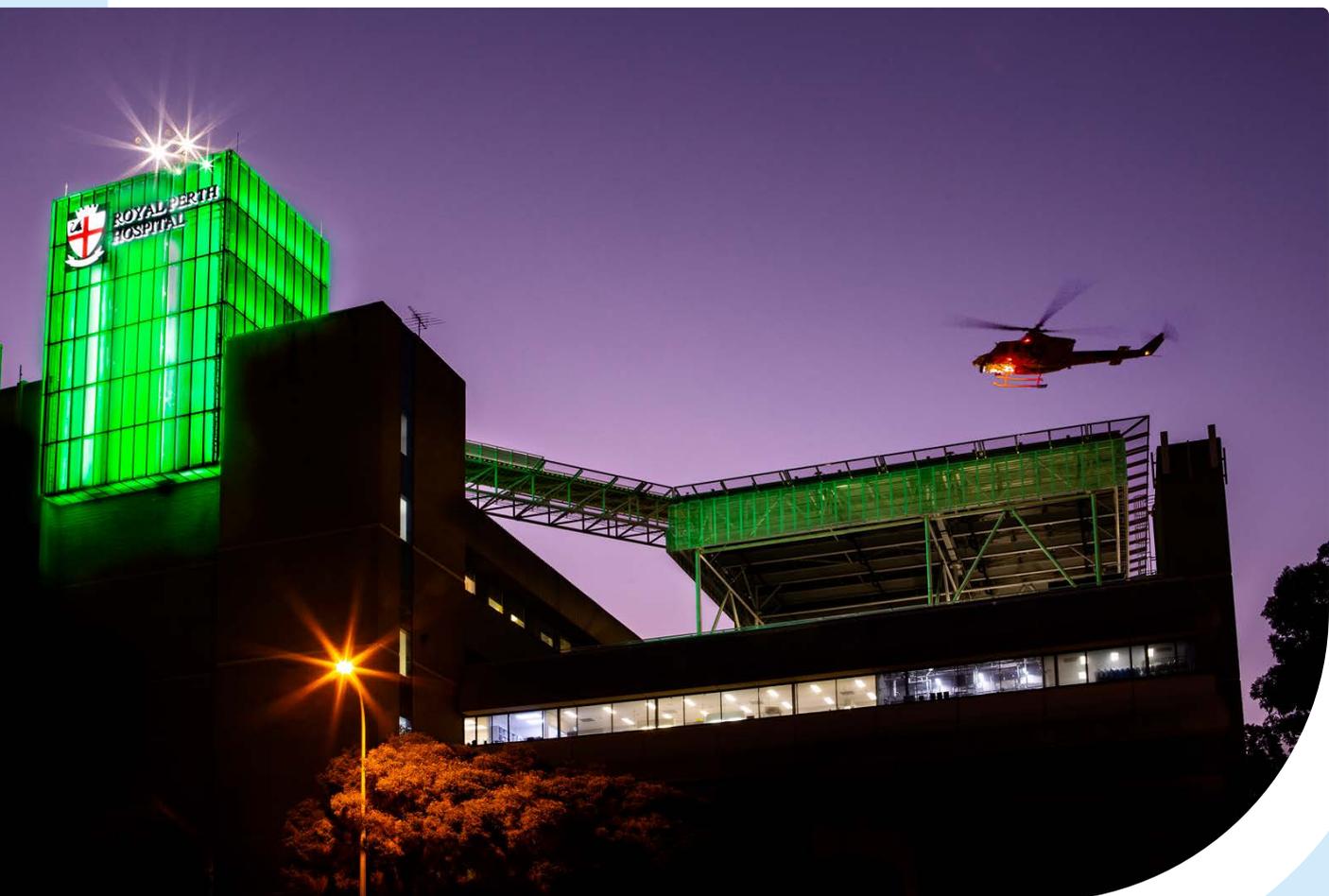
This is not an isolated issue; it happens across Australia and internationally. That's why we are planning for winter, to make sure we can meet demand and keep patient care flowing.

Bed capacity

We're increasing the number of beds within our hospitals and community services to meet the needs of our patients. This includes working with private hospitals and expanding care at home programs.

We are:

- bringing St John of God Mount Lawley Hospital into public hands, adding more beds and surgical capacity
- providing additional patient capacity at existing public hospitals
- collaborating with private providers to increase the number of public beds available across the system
- partnering with private hospitals to support delivery of elective surgery for public patients
- optimising Hospital in the Home beds and virtual services, allowing specialist care to be delivered in a patient's own home.



Caring for older people

Older Western Australians deserve care that supports their safety, independence and recovery. Every day, around 300 people remain in hospital due to a shortage of available aged care services.

We're working with aged care providers to provide timely access to community and aged care services. This will help older patients move safely out of hospital when ready, freeing up beds for others in need.

We'll improve care for older people by:

- providing more Time to Think beds to help older people leave hospital while still deciding their next steps
- using technology to support recovery at home through 24/7 monitoring and daily virtual check-ins
- expanding specialist care for older people in their own home
- introducing dedicated Hospital in the Home coordinators for aged care, making it easier for older adults to receive hospital-level care where they live.



Caring for our workforce

If we don't look after our workforce, they can't look after us. We know there are growing pressures on our workforce, particularly during winter when there is higher demand.

We'll continue to :

- mobilise extra staff during peak demand
- support leave management
- encourage vaccination and safe work practices.



Education

Knowing where to go for appropriate care helps people get treated faster and keeps emergency departments free for those who need them most.

Research shows one in three Western Australians find it difficult to get clear health information and many people attend emergency departments with non-life-threatening conditions that can be safely treated elsewhere.

This winter, we're strengthening advice and guidance on when and where to seek care, helping people make informed choices based on their needs, time and cost.

This includes improving awareness of alternative care options such as:

- **1800MEDICARE (1800 633 422)** – provides free, trusted health advice 24/7 and can help guide you to the right care which may include self care advice, seeing a GP, attending urgent care or referring you to the WA Virtual Emergency Department.
- **Urgent care clinics** – treat non-life-threatening injuries and illnesses - some clinics are free and bulk bill eligible patients while others are privately run and may have out of pocket costs.
- **GPs and pharmacies** – can help manage many everyday health concerns.
- **WA Virtual Emergency Department** – allows some patients to speak with the same emergency doctors who work in hospitals, from the comfort of home, without needing to travel to an emergency department.

By helping people access the right care, at the right time, we are reducing unnecessary pressure on busy emergency departments and supporting faster care across the health system this winter.

Escalation framework

Last winter was extremely challenging for our hospitals amidst an unprecedented influenza season. We want to ensure that the community is fully prepared and informed about how WA Health will keep the community safe for our upcoming winter season, no matter what it brings.

At times of sustained or extreme pressure the whole health system works together with the State Health Operations Centre to make sure urgent care is prioritised.

This means WA Health will:

- reschedule some elective surgeries when necessary, to ensure more beds are available for patients who need it the most
- review and adjust staffing levels, deploying extra workforce and mobilising agile teams where needed
- activate Incident Management Teams (local and statewide) to lead and coordinate the response if required
- work closely with hospitals to manage demand and ensure urgent actions are implemented
- speed up patient flow and safe discharges to free up beds quickly
- identify patients suitable for alternative care settings (e.g. community care, Hospital in the Home) to reduce hospital pressure.

This framework is in place all year round to deal with system pressure or significant emergencies, not just the winter season.



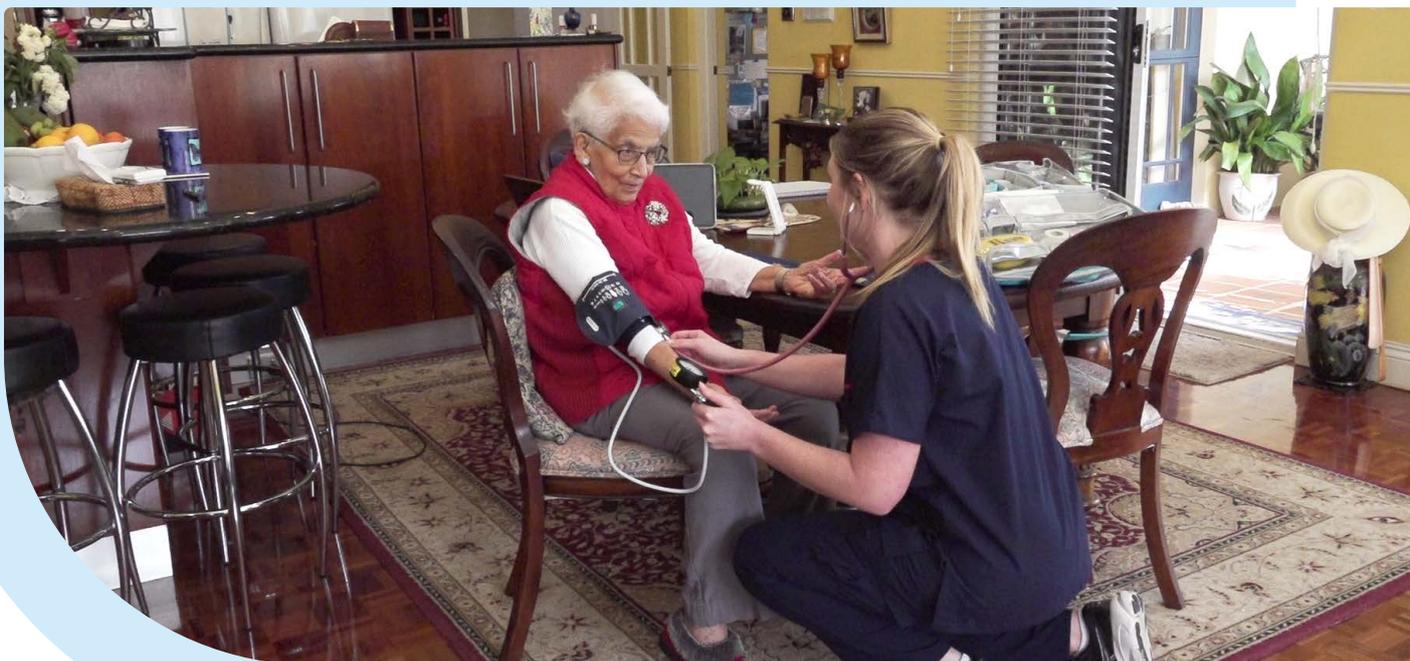
How you can help this winter

Each of us has a part to play in ensuring our community stays safe this winter.

By helping people access the right care, at the right time, we are reducing unnecessary pressure on busy emergency departments and supporting faster care across the health system this winter.

If you need help:

- in an emergency, dial triple zero (000) or visit your [nearest emergency department](#)
- find your [nearest urgent care](#) clinic or [general practitioner](#)
- call [1800MEDICARE](#) (1800 633 422) if you are unsure what to do.



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in alternative formats on request.

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