

+NEWS |

Near doubling of patients put off visiting GP by wait times, finds annual survey



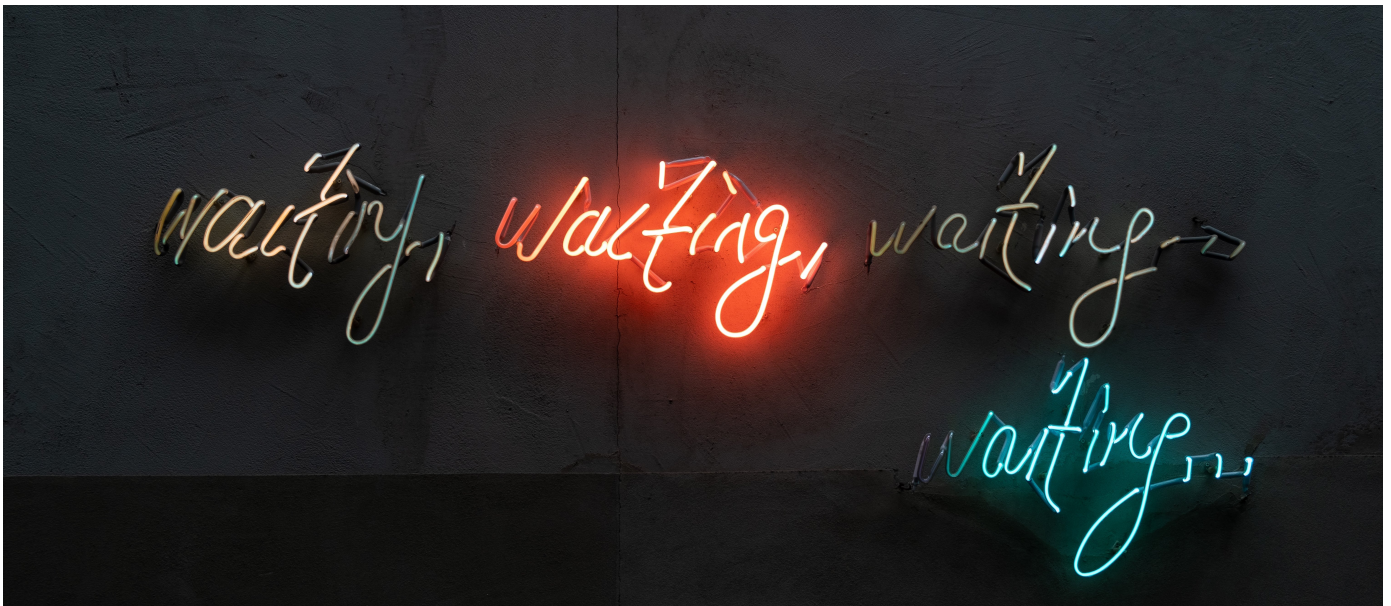
Fiona Cassie

fcassie@nzdoctor.co.nz

1

Thursday 14 December 2023, 03:52 PM

5 minutes to Read



Appointment waiting times are now a much more significant barrier to accessing GP care than cost, finds the latest annual New Zealand Health Survey [Image: Levi Meir Clancy on Unsplash]

“It’s been clear for the past six years that the health system as a whole has been under enormous pressure, and today’s findings reinforce that”

About one in five people report that having to wait too long for an appointment has put them off visiting a GP – nearly twice as many as the previous year, finds the latest annual New Zealand Health Survey

The big jump in people reporting waiting time as a barrier to GP care is one of the key findings of the 2022/23 survey released today by the Ministry of Health.

The survey also reports that over the past five years, visits to emergency departments have continued to increase, and visits to GPs have decreased. Nearly 6800 adults (15 years and over) and just over 2000 children participated in the annual survey, held between July 2022 and July 2023.

Waiting time now bigger barrier than cost

The 2022/23 survey is only the second time people have been asked whether the wait time for an appointment was a barrier to visiting or talking to their GP.

In 2021/22, waiting time (11.5%) was reported as only a slightly bigger barrier for adults than cost (10.7%).

But a year on, the number of adults reporting waiting time as a barrier has nearly doubled to 21.2 per cent or about one in five adults, while the cost barrier only increased slightly to 12.9 per cent over the same period.

Waiting times also jumped as a barrier for children from 8 per cent in 2021/22 to 14.8 per cent in 2022/2023.

READ MORE

- › **NEWS: Anatomy of a crisis: Layer cake of woe built on workforce and funding shortages**
- › **NEWS: Clinic for unenrolled helps with closed books**
- › **NEWS: Factors forcing closed practice books must be addressed**

ED visits up and GPs down

The survey found emergency department visits were up, with 18 per cent of children (compared with 16.9% in 2021/22) and 17.9 per cent of adults (16.9% 2021/22) reporting at least one ED visit in the previous 12 months.

Visits to ED in 2022/23 were highest in children aged 0-4 at 28.7 per cent (up on 24.6% in 2021/22), followed by adults aged 75-plus at 25.9 per cent (22.4% in 2021/22).

ED visits in the previous decade for children (0-14 years) have fluctuated between a low of 12.7 per cent in 2020/21 (a time of lockdown restrictions) to 15.8 per cent in 2014/15 and 2019/2020.

The past five years have seen a steady downward trend in children visiting a GP, from 73.3 per cent in 2017/18 to 64.4 per cent in 2022/23.

Adults visiting a GP also decreased from 78 per cent to 73.2 per cent over the same period.

Minister says 'urgent change' needed

Health minister Shane Reti, a specialist GP, says in a media release that the **survey results “underline just how badly an urgent change in direction”** for health is needed.

“It’s been clear for the past six years that the health system as a whole has been under enormous pressure, and today’s findings reinforce that,” Dr Reti says.

While there are some “isolated bright spots” – a decline in smoking rates and hazardous drinking, for example – “there is also a huge amount to be concerned about”.

He identifies a “clear correlation” between the cost-of-living crisis and health, saying it is “hugely upsetting” to learn from the survey that at least one in three Māori (35.1%) and Pacific (39.6%) children were living in households where food ran out often or sometimes compared with nearly one in six European/other and one in eight Asian children.

Dr Reti says the Coalition Government is “more committed than ever” to its five key priorities: shorter ED stays, faster cancer treatment, improved immunisation and reduced wait times for surgery and first specialist assessment.

“A high priority is the health workforce – improved support for our workforce is key to solving these other major issues.”

Deterred by GP cost

In the 2022/23 survey, 12.9 per cent of adults said that in the preceding 12 months, there was a time when they had a medical problem but did not visit or talk to a GP because of cost.

This is slightly up on 10.7 per cent in 2021/22 and 10.2 per cent in 2020/21. But still down on the 13.5-15 per cent who reported cost as a barrier from 2011/12 to 2019/20.

The most significant increase in cost as a barrier over the past 12 months was reported by Pacific (17.6%, up on 11% in 2021/22), followed by Māori (16.9%, 14.9% in 2021/22), compared with European/other (12.4 %, 11.1% in 2021/22).

Like previous surveys, women in 2022/23 were more likely (15.1 per cent) to report cost as a barrier to visiting the GP than men (10.5 per cent).

Deterred by pharmacy cost

In the 2022/23 period, 4 per cent of adults reported instances where they received a prescription but chose not to collect one or more items from the pharmacy because of cost. This is slightly up on last year's survey finding of 3.3 per cent of adults.

The survey was largely carried out before the previous government scrapped the stand \$5 prescription charge on 1 July 2023. The incoming Coalition Government has said it is committed to reinstating the \$5 prescription fee for most people.

Previous surveys found that prescription cost was a deterrent to 3.3 per cent of adults in 2021/22, 3.1 per cent in 2020/21 and 7 per cent in 2016/17.

The survey also found that Māori and Pacific adults were 2.1 and 2.2 times as likely as non-Māori and non-Pacific adults to not collect a prescription due to cost after adjusting for age and gender.

In 2022/23, 1.5 per cent of children, an estimated 14,000 children, had a prescription that was not collected due to cost. This is down from 6.6 per cent in 2011/12 and 3.1 per cent in 2017/18.

Adult primary care use

In the preceding 12 months:

73.2 per cent visited or talked to their GP (75.6% in 2021/22)

95 per cent reported they had a regular medical centre (94% in 2021/22)

69.3 per cent reported they had seen a GP at their regular medical centre (71% in 2021/22)

the average number of GP consultations stayed the same as last year at 2.4 (down from 2.9 in 2019/2020)

31.6 per cent saw a practice nurse without seeing a GP (35.7% in 2021/22)

the average number of practice nurse consultations stayed steady at 0.7

there was also a slight drop in the number of patients seeing a nurse at their regular medical centre from 40.1 per cent to 39.2 per cent.

Other key findings – smoking down, breastfeeding up

Most adults in New Zealand (86.2%) reported being in good health, similar to levels reported over the previous five years.

Hazardous drinking rates declined from 18.7 per cent in 2021/22 to 16 per cent in 2022/23.

Smoking rates continue to decline, with 6.8 per cent of adults who smoke daily in 2022/23, down from 8.6 per cent in 2021/22 and 16.4 per cent in 2011/12.

This trend was observed across all ethnic groups.

Daily smoking was more common in adults living in the most deprived neighbourhoods (10.7%).

Daily vaping increased over the past five years from 2.6 per cent in 2017/18 to 9.7 per cent in 2022/23.

Daily vaping was highest among those aged 18–24 years (25.2%) and among Māori (23.5%) and Pacific peoples (18.7%), and also more common in adults living in the most deprived neighbourhoods (15.8%).

One in five (21.2%) young adults (aged 15–24) experienced high or very high levels of psychological distress in the four weeks before completing the 2022/23 survey.

High or very high levels of psychological distress were also more common in disabled adults than in non-disabled adults.

Less than half of adults (46.5%) met physical activity guidelines.

About one in three adults (32.6%) in New Zealand were classified as obese, similar to five years ago. More than one in three Māori (35.1%) and Pacific (39.6%) children were living in households where food runs out sometimes or often.

Exclusive breastfeeding was the highest rate in the past 10 years. At the time of the survey, more than half of children aged four months to less than five years (58.1%) were exclusively breastfed until four months old.

TELL US WHAT YOU THINK

Please add your comments using the comment function below and, remember, if in doubt, **check out our comment policy**.

Michelle, capture your time to Read, Watch, Listen or Delve by clicking CAPTURE.

CAPTURE

You can view your CAPTURE RECORD [here](#).