

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Arthritis is one of the most common chronic conditions, affecting more than 1.6 million Ontarians(1). Arthritis is a major cause of morbidity, disability and health care utilization. Most arthritis is managed in primary care by general practitioners and family physicians but many people with arthritis require specialist care, and some are treated in emergency departments. In 2003, over 4.6 million visits were made to Ontario emergency departments(2), several of which were for arthritis and related conditions.

The purpose of this report is to examine the patterns of emergency department use by Ontarians with arthritis and related conditions by age, sex and geography, for the purpose of service planning and enhancement.

Key Findings

- In 2003, 165,000 Ontarians visited an emergency department due to arthritis and related conditions. This is equivalent to 13.4 arthritis-related visits per 1,000 Ontarians per year.
- Arthritis-related emergency department visits increase with age, but the majority of visits is made by working-age individuals.
- More women than men visit emergency departments for osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis, and more men than women visit for gout.
- Proportionally more arthritis-related visits are triaged as less urgent or non-urgent than the average emergency department visit. This is especially seen in rural areas where significantly more visits are made for non-urgent conditions than in urban areas.
- Nearly half of visitors for arthritis and related conditions receive an intervention in the emergency department, and the majority of interventions consist of diagnostic imaging such as an x-ray.
- Younger visitors for arthritis and related conditions are more likely to leave without being seen, and older visitors are more likely to go on to receive further care following the emergency department visit.
- Morning is the most popular time to visit for arthritis and related conditions. More visits are made on Monday than on any other day, and very few visits are made during the night.
- Areas with low provision of specialist services, such as rheumatologists and orthopaedic surgeons, tend to have the highest rates of arthritis-related emergency department visits per capita.