

Surgical Wait Times in Ontario: What the Data Tells Us

As the Ontario government prepares to issue new licences for private surgical and diagnostic centres to perform orthopedic surgeries, wait times are once again in the spotlight. Public concern is understandable: many people across the province are waiting for procedures that significantly affect their health, mobility, and quality of life.

But experts say it's important to look closely at *where* the real pressures in the system exist and who is most impacted when delays occur.

Are Orthopedic Wait Times as Bad as We Think?

Dr. David Urbach, Head of the Department of Surgery at Women's College Hospital, says there is a "huge disconnect" between public perception and what provincial data actually shows.

According to Ontario Health data, more than 80 per cent of patients receive orthopedic surgeries, such as hip and knee replacements, within the province's recommended timelines.

"This doesn't mean everything is perfect," Urbach notes, "but overall, the system is in remarkably good shape."

However, geography matters. Patients living outside Toronto and the Greater Toronto Area tend to face longer waits, highlighting persistent regional inequities in access to care.

The Problem of "Variation"

One of the biggest challenges in Ontario's healthcare system is what experts call *variation*. There is no single provincial waitlist. Instead, patients are attached to individual surgeons and hospitals, each with different capacities.

"These extreme cases are the ones we hear about," Urbach explains, "but they don't reflect everyone's experience."

While these long waits may not be the norm, for the individuals affected the consequences can be life-altering.

Where the Real Crises Are

While orthopedic and cancer-related surgeries tend to meet targets, other areas are facing serious access challenges, including:

- Paediatric surgery
- Routine gynecology and non-cancer gynecological procedures
- Some diagnostic and specialist services

Delays in these areas often receive less attention but can lead to worsening health outcomes, increased pain, and greater dependence on caregivers.

What the Data Shows: Average Wait Times in Ontario

Once the decision to proceed with surgery is made, Ontario Health reports the following average wait times for patients (Priority 1 emergency cases are excluded):

- Arterial Bypass - 80% treated within target
- Cataract Surgery - 82% treated within target
- Gallbladder - 94% treated within target
- Hip Replacement - 78% treated within target
- Hysterectomy - 73% treated within target
- Kidney Stone Removal - 95% treated within target
- Knee Replacement - 79% treated within target
- Paediatric Cardiac - 92% treated within target
- Paediatric General Surgery - 76% treated within target
- Thyroid - 81% treated within target
- Tumour Removal (benign) - 73% treated within target

What Comes Next?

Major changes are expected in 2026, including coordinated electronic referral systems that could place patients into shared queues rather than isolated ones. If implemented well, this could reduce extreme delays and improve fairness.

In the meantime, the conversation around wait times must move beyond headlines. The question isn't only *how long* people wait, but:

- Who waits the longest
- Which services are under-resourced
- How delays disproportionately affect people with disabilities and caregivers

Source:

1. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/toronto/article/very-fragmented-these-are-the-wait-times-for-various-surgeries-and-scans-in-ontario/>

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