

Answers to Frequently Asked
Questions on the
Privacy Practices of the
Ontario Wait Times Information
System:
Patients

Disclaimer

This list of frequently asked questions (FAQs) contains an analysis of the privacy issues concerning the collection, use and disclosure of personal health information by the Wait Time Information System (WTIS) for wait list reporting and wait list management in Ontario. These FAQs are intended to serve as an educational tool for patients whose personal health information is used within the WTIS. As such, these FAQs should be used for general reference purposes only and are not to be construed as legal advice.

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What is a “wait list”?

A “wait list” is a list maintained by physicians and/or hospitals to keep track of people who need specialized surgical care or diagnostic services. A wait list allows physicians and health system administrators to monitor and prioritize their patients by the urgency of the treatment they need. Currently, most surgeons maintain their patient wait lists in their office.

What is a “wait time”?

A “wait time” is the amount of time – typically measured in days or weeks – that a patient must wait for a specific procedure or treatment. Patients may experience several separate wait times from when they first notice a health problem until their treatment is completed (e.g. from the time when they are referred from their family physician to a specialist and again from the specialist’s decision to treat to the actual procedure completion).

What is the Wait Times Information System?

The Wait Times Information System (WTIS) is a repository of patient information used to track, measure and report on wait times for patients receiving services in the following five key service areas: 1) cancer surgery; 2) cardiac revascularization and catheterization; 3) cataract surgery; 4) hip and knee joint replacements; and 5) MRI and CT scans. The WTIS is a key component of Ontario’s Wait Time Strategy aimed at providing patients with better access to health care services by reducing wait times for specific surgical procedures and treatments. It is anticipated that the WTIS will be expanded to include other surgical and non-surgical services areas.

What information is provided by the WTIS?

The WTIS includes information to manage wait lists and report on wait times. The WTIS provides physicians and hospital administrators information that allows them to make informed decisions about:

- Who is waiting for which specialist;
- At what priority level people are waiting;
- Who should receive care next;
- How many people are waiting;
- How long people have been waiting; and
- How long people are waiting compared to the access target for a given procedure.

Who administers the WTIS and why?

The WTIS is administered by the Wait Time Information Office (WTIO) based at Cancer Care Ontario (CCO). Even though CCO is an organization that deals primarily with cancer care, it was asked by the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care (MOHLTC) to manage the WTIS because of its unique, previous experience working with hospitals using health information systems to manage and monitor access to cancer services. The WTIO will manage the WTIS until a long-term manager is established.

How will the provincial Enterprise Master Patient Index (EMPI) support the WTIS?

The EMPI is a client registry that stores demographic and selected personal information (e.g. your name, date of birth, medical record number, health card number) used by health care providers to identify you. The WTIS will use the EMPI to accurately identify and link patient encounters and provide accurate wait time information for patients with records in multiple hospital information systems or on multiple wait lists. This will work to increase the accuracy of information in the WTIS while also ensuring that individuals are not placed on more than one wait list for the same procedure.

What type of information does the WTIS collect?

The WTIS collects information from hospitals and the Cardiac Care Network Registry on patients who are waiting for diagnostic procedures or surgeries in Ontario. Hospitals only submit specific types of medical information required for wait list reporting to the WTIS. This includes information such as your name, the name of your health care provider, your contact information, the type of surgical procedure or diagnostic service you require, the date of the decision to treat, the scheduled procedure or the diagnostic service date and actual date of the procedure or diagnostic service.

Does my physician need my consent to disclose my personal health information to the WTIO for the purposes of the WTIS?

The *Ontario Personal Information Protection Act, 2004* (PHIPA) permits health information custodians (e.g. hospitals) to disclose personal health information to a “prescribed entity” for the purpose of managing, monitoring or planning of the health care system, without patient consent. The WTIS, managed by the WTIO, falls under this provision in PHIPA since the WTIS is used to monitor wait times. This means that patients may not withhold or “lock” their personal health information from being added to the WTIS.

How much personal health information does the WTIS collect?

The WTIS only collects the minimum amount of personal health information required to monitor the length and size of wait lists in Ontario from participating hospitals. Only medical information required for wait list reporting will be submitted by hospitals to the WTIS.

For what purposes is information in the WTIS shared?

De-identified information (i.e. information with any identifying information, such as your name or date of birth, removed from it) from the WTIS is publicly reported on-line at www.ontariowaittimes.com. In addition, the WTIS supports the management of wait lists by tracking patients waiting for a specific procedure based on the severity of the patient’s condition (referred to as “priority level”). Hospital administration can use this view of wait lists to determine how many patients are waiting, how long they have been waiting compared to wait times targets and to monitor demand for operating room and diagnostic imaging resources. Surgeons and their staff can use this information to help manage their wait lists

and guide patient-scheduling decisions. Cardiac waitlist information is shared with Ontario's Cardiac Care Network to manage cardiac wait lists in Ontario.

Benefits of implementing the WTIS include:

- Ensuring a consistent method for deciding who needs care most;
- Providing patients and providers with access to information on the shortest available wait time by hospital;
- Facilitating patients and providers informed decisions about where to seek care; and
- Enabling the public to hold the government accountable on their promise to reduce wait times.

Who has access to health information in the WTIS?

WTIO staff who administer the WTIS have access to health information in the WTIS. Physicians and other hospital authorized agents can only access information about their own patients and the facility at which they work via the WTIS.

How is information in the WTIS protected?

All personal health information collected in the WTIS is protected by Ontario's health privacy legislation known as PHIPA. Specifically, administrative safeguards, such as data protection policies, govern the collection, use and disclosure of patient information via the WTIS. WTIO staff are trained on these policies and sign detailed confidentiality agreements as a condition of their employment. The WTIS also employs technical and physical safeguards to protect information against unauthorized access, use, modification and disclosure. For example:

- All users require unique usernames and passwords to access the WTIS;
- The type and amount of information a user may access is controlled based on the privileges assigned to the user;
- WTIS information is encrypted while in transit; and
- The WTIS is housed in a secure data centre with restricted access and security guards.

How long is information kept in the WTIS?

To allow for effective health research and the monitoring of surgical outcomes, personal health information in the WTIS is retained indefinitely. However, to respect patient privacy, information is retained in the least identifiable form possible.

Can an individual view his or her health information that resides within the WTIS?

Yes. However, to ensure individuals receive a full explanation of the information relating to them within the WTIS and to allow them to request corrections to that information, they should request access through the physician who added their information to the WTIS or through the privacy contact person at the hospital where they have been placed on a wait list.

Does the WTIO ever sell patient information?

No. Ontario's PHIPA prohibits the WTIO from ever selling patient information provided by a hospital or physician.

Will information from the WTIS be used to contact me?

No. Your personal health information in the WTIS is not used to contact you for any purpose. All contact with you relating to the procedure or service for which you are on a wait list will occur through your physician and his or her office.

If I have questions about the handling of information in the WTIS, who can I ask?

Questions or concerns about the handling of information in the WTIS should be directed to the WTIO Privacy Lead by email at wtioprivacy@cancercare.on.ca, by phone at 416.971.9800 ext. 3359 or in writing to WTIO Privacy Lead, Cancer Care Ontario, 505 University Avenue, 17th Floor, Toronto, Ontario, M5G 1X3. Further information concerning the WTIS is also available at: www.ontariowaittimes.com.