



**EMERGENCY MEDICAL  
SERVICES AGENCY**  
LOS ANGELES COUNTY

# EMS NEWS

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## For Immediate Release

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## **Seasonal Respiratory Illnesses Straining Local Emergency Rooms** Health Officials Urge Residents to Seek Treatment of Common Cold Symptoms from Primary Care Provider

**LOS ANGELES (January 17, 2008)** – Hospitals across Los Angeles County are reporting an increase in the number of patients presenting with seasonal respiratory illnesses associated with the common winter cold in local emergency departments, according to the Los Angeles County Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Agency, which tracks emergency department saturation.

Since the beginning of this year, hospitals have also increased their requests for ambulance traffic to be diverted from emergency departments. Ambulance diversion rates are one indicator of how crowded Los Angeles County emergency departments are at any given time. Between December 30 and January 5, the ambulance diversion rate throughout Los Angeles County increased from 12% to 19%. Between January 6 and January 12, the diversion rate increased to 21%.

“Patients tend to flood local emergency rooms at this time of year for symptoms that can most often be more quickly and appropriately treated by a primary care doctor,” said Dr. Bruce Chernof, MD, Director and Chief Medical Officer for the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services, which oversees the EMS Agency. “Emergency departments are very crowded this time of year and patients without life-threatening emergencies coming to the emergency department can expect long delays as patients with more severe illnesses or injuries are treated first.”

Patients with cold or flu-like symptoms, such as fever, cough, sore throat and body aches, should first contact their physician for care. If they do not have a regular doctor, they can contact the County Health Information Line (1-800-427-8700) for low-cost medical clinics throughout the County. Those who have significant illness such as diabetes, heart trouble, or lung disease and get sick with the flu are encouraged to use the emergency department if there is no other alternative.

“The EMS system is very busy right now and emergency rooms are crowded,” said Dr. William Koenig, MD, Medical Director of the EMS Agency. “Patients with minor illnesses can expect to have longer wait times at emergency departments. Waits of 4-6 hours have been reported.”

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There are a number of steps that everyone can follow to help prevent the spread of respiratory illnesses. These include covering your mouth with a tissue or handkerchief when you cough or sneeze and washing your hands frequently with soap and water.

For people who have not received a flu shot, there is still time to get one. Los Angeles County Public Health Centers still have plenty of flu vaccine available. For more information regarding the hours and locations of public health centers, visit <http://lapublichealth.org> or call 211LA, the county information and referral line. Many pharmacies are also administering the flu vaccine. These locations can be found by logging onto [www.findaflushot.com](http://www.findaflushot.com).

### **About the Los Angeles County Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Agency**

As a division of the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services, the EMS Agency is responsible for managing the county's medical 9-1-1 system, which includes fire departments, law enforcement, ambulance companies, hospitals, public and private organizations and EMS providers. Los Angeles County has the largest multi-jurisdictional emergency medical services system in the nation and handles over half a million 9-1-1 medical calls a year.

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