

# The Medical Post

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## Wait times excessive for majority of gastroenterology referrals

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### One-third of patients have alarm symptoms that could signal serious disease

By David Hodges

MONTREAL | Excessive wait times for more than 70% of all gastroenterology referrals are putting patients' lives at risk and causing many to suffer needlessly, a study conducted by the Canadian Association of Gastroenterology (CAG) concludes.

Findings from the Gastroenterology Wait Times Program—an audit of nearly 200 Canadian gastroenterology specialists, capturing data on 5,500 patient visits—have shown that 70% of patients referred by primary care physicians wait more than two months to see a gastroenterologist and have a diagnostic test, while 50% wait more than four months and 20% wait more than 10 months.

Perhaps more troubling is that among these patients, more than one-third have alarm symptoms, which may indicate serious underlying disease such as cancer.

Even patients classified as urgent are waiting two to five times longer than best practice targets recommend (see table at right).

"We are able to see patients in a time frame that expert review would suggest is only appropriate 20% of the time," said CAG president Dr. Desmond Leddin in an interview. "There really is a severe problem in terms of wait times for gastro-enterology and consultations."

The situation is "unacceptable," he said.

Based on the results of the audit, Dr. Leddin has asked Prime Minister Paul Martin to incorporate gastroenterology as a priority into the federal government's wait list initiatives program so that Canadians may start to obtain appropriate access to gastroenterologists.

"Patients are suffering while they're on wait lists," Dr. Leddin said. "And we quite frankly don't understand why the first ministers and the federal government have identified five areas as a priority for wait time management but gastroenterology is not on that list."

More than cash needed

However, a simple cash infusion to bolster human and technical resources will not remedy the current wait list situation, Dr. Leddin said.

"Canadian gastroenterologists will need to work hand-in-hand with federal and provincial governments . . . and move toward the improved use of these resources," he said.

"We hope that by 2008 patients with digestive symptoms should not have to wait more than eight weeks to see a gastroenterologist."

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