

17 December, 2015

St George Hospital urges caution over the holiday period

There will be no relaxing this festive season for the staff of St George Hospital's Emergency Department (ED) as they prepare for the busiest fortnight of the year.

Dr Peter Grant, Senior Staff Specialist, ED said Boxing Day and the first few days of the New Year often have the highest numbers, with up to 25 new patients arriving each hour at peak times.

"Some patients may attend the ED over the festive season due to inability to access their usual health care provider or due to limited social support, however increased patient numbers are seen for a wide variety of reasons," Dr Grant said.

"Elderly patients with limited mobility are particularly vulnerable to falls in unfamiliar surroundings of relative's homes, especially when negotiating driveways and staircases. Last festive season more than 50 patients over the age of 75 attended the ED as a result of falls, with many sustaining limb fractures and head injuries. Rainy weather sees an increase in the number of older patients suffering falls, while collapse due to dehydration and hyperthermia are more common during heat waves.

"At the other end of the age scale we treat children who have suffered injuries resulting from accidents involving Christmas toys, skateboards and bikes."

Dr Grant said more than 35 cases of gastroenteritis were treated in the ED between Christmas and New Year last year, many of which may have been preventable through simple measures such as good food hygiene, adequate refrigeration, and close attention to hand washing.

"Major trauma cases, some of which are airlifted to the ED by helicopter, also peak at this time of year; with young males accounting for over a quarter of cases, with alcohol and risk taking behaviours often being contributing factors.

"An increase in mental health presentations may also occur, as Christmas can be a lonely time for the socially isolated."

The public are encouraged to be proactive in avoiding ED attendance over the Christmas and New Year period by:

- Taking additional care on the roads and while participating in outdoor recreational activities.
- Ensuring that Christmas gifts such as bikes and skateboards are accompanied with protective equipment such as helmets and knee pads and are used under appropriate supervision.
- Keeping a close eye on elderly relatives with impaired mobility in unfamiliar surroundings, and ensuring that they have an adequate supply of prescription medications to last the holiday period.

South Eastern Sydney Local Health District

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- Making regular checks on the well-being of the socially isolated.
- Taking precautions on very hot days such as maintaining hydration, minimising physical activity, wearing light clothing and avoiding alcohol. Staying indoors between 11am and 5pm, ideally in an air-conditioned environment, is also advised.
- Supervising and keeping a watchful eye on children, particularly around water.
- Washing hands with soap and water before eating or preparing food, after using the toilet and after changing nappies.
- Not leaving food out in the heat, avoiding keeping leftovers for more than a few days, and careful cleaning of food preparation surfaces.
- Moderating alcohol consumption, particularly on New Year's Eve.

Patients with non-urgent conditions should attend an after-hours GP clinic, contact a home doctor service, or phone the 24-hour free hotline *Healthdirect* Australia on 1800 022 222, which is manned by a registered nurse.

Patients who are experiencing heart and breathing problems or who need urgent medical attention should always attend their Emergency Department or contact Triple 0.

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