

March 25, 2021



Dear Residents of Altona and surrounding area:

IMPORTANT UPDATE ABOUT OUR LOCAL HEALTH SERVICES

The Altona Community Memorial Health Centre is facing human resource challenges that will temporarily affect Emergency Department services at the Altona Community Memorial Health Centre. Nurse vacancy rates at our site have grown over the past several years and more significantly in the past six months due to a number of factors, including multiple temporary staff leaves and significant challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic. This has placed increased pressures on services in the emergency department, sometimes resulting in intermittent and unexpected service disruptions.

Emergency Department Services

We know that having a 24/7 emergency department in Altona is important to the communities it serves. It is important to us, too. Following is a brief overview of the impact of these temporary changes:

- Some emergency department services at Altona Community Memorial Health Centre will be temporarily unavailable starting April 1 and until this fall, while we work to stabilize and add to the nursing workforce.
- Outpatient services currently provided in the emergency department will continue to be scheduled, such as lab work, minor procedures and wound care.
- Urgent care services will be temporarily set up within Altona's emergency department. Details are currently being finalized in preparation for an April implementation date.
- While we recruit to fill vacancies and restore 24/7 emergency department services, we will work with Emergency Response Services and other sites to ensure residents in the community and surrounding area can continue to get the care they need when they need it.

The fastest way to get help for a medical emergency is to dial 911.

Paramedics are highly trained to provide a wide array of care on site and on the way to hospital, including triaging and treating injuries and medical emergencies. While the service change is in effect, patients with higher acuity needs will be temporarily directed to the appropriate setting for the care they need. This would include Boundary Trails Health Centre in Morden/Winkler and Morris General Hospital, both of which are about 40 kilometres away.

How will this Impact Inpatient Services at the Altona Community Memorial Health Centre?

These changes will not affect hospital in-patient services at the Altona Community Memorial Health Centre.

Accessing Primary Care (Medical Clinic Services)

Access to primary care services will continue. We encourage you to continue accessing primary health care as you have, i.e. Altona Medical Clinic.

All general, less serious health care needs can be addressed by calling Health Links–Info Santé at 1-888-315-9257.

What you can Expect

The recruitment of clinical staff is a constant challenge in rural communities throughout the province and the country. Altona is no exception. The challenge has been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has required resources to support testing and immunization clinics, and significantly reduced our ability to recruit recent and upcoming nursing graduates into open positions. Overtime and the use of agency nurses have been used to overcome staffing challenges in the past, but they are not enough to address the extent of nursing shortages we are currently facing.

This temporary service change within Altona's emergency department will allow us to reset and stabilize the workforce in order to provide high quality, predictable and sustainable health care services that meet the needs of the community of Altona and surrounding area, now and into the future.

Site leaders and the health region will use the time to build a stronger and more reliably available emergency department that provides a consistently high level of emergent care 24 hours per day, seven days per week. We will work in collaboration with the community, physicians and staff, nursing colleges and union leadership to help achieve that goal.

We are committed to keeping the public informed. While we appreciate that change is sometimes difficult to envision, it is important to note these solutions and decisions are based on our desire to meet the immediate needs of the community.

For More Information:

We understand that community residents may have questions and concerns. **A town hall meeting will be scheduled in April to provide more information and to respond to questions.**

In the meantime, for more information, please contact Josh Gruninger, Director - Acute Community Hospitals, at jgruninger@southernhealth.ca or Noreen Shirliff, Regional Lead - Acute Care and Chief Nursing Officer at nshirliff@southernhealth.ca; tel. 204 388 2056.

Southern Health-Santé Sud would like to take this opportunity to thank health care providers for their continued hard work and their dedication throughout this period. We also thank the community for your patience and understanding during this time.