

## **Call Info-Santé: 8-1-1**

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Do you use the services of Info-Santé? If you are English-speaking, probably not.

Info-Santé is the bilingual, province-wide telephone help line for answers to health questions. Since 2008 it has been accessible through a simple three-digit number, 811, which immediately provides the option to “Press 9” for service in English. Latest statistics indicate that 24,000,000 calls are answered annually. But the English-speaking population accesses these services proportionately less than their French-speaking neighbours. We should learn about all the services available to us and use them more. After all, we’re all paying for them!

If you have a non-urgent health question, your first thought should be to call Info-Santé. Health care professionals are on duty 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to answer your call. And, while there is a single number for the whole province, questions of a local nature are transferred to someone familiar with the resources available in the area.

While of course no illness can be diagnosed over the phone, lots of concerns can be addressed and responded to with an authority that is not available through a simple Google search, where the reliability of the information can sometimes be questionable. Do you want to learn about the risks of immunization? About the symptoms of common illnesses? About how to protect yourself from infectious disease? Do you need more information on dealing with a family member with Alzheimer’s or Parkinson’s? Do you want to understand organ donation better? What about the health risks if there is a blue-green algae bloom in your lake? Info-Santé can provide you with answers to these and many other questions, more than I can think of to pose.

In many cases, these answers will be referred to the appropriate place within the health and social services network. True to its name, the network is a fully integrated web of services designed to help you maintain your health and well-being, both physical and mental. Too often, we complain that we are unable to find a doctor and resort to over-use of the emergency department of the hospital. While there is a recognized doctor shortage in Quebec and elsewhere in Canada, there are many ways to access the help we need. Although knowing that this is a widespread problem doesn’t help us in our search for a doctor, it should perhaps encourage us to look for alternatives in non-urgent situations so that the doctors we do have can concentrate on the truly medical needs of patients.

The overburdened system requires a complete “re-engineering” which is actually underway, at least in some respects. One of these is the Info-Santé line. By encouraging people to ask questions and to get referrals to the agencies and services that they need, when they need them, the pressure on the family practitioner and emergency services is reduced, allowing those services to be more available in the circumstances when they are genuinely required, such as accidents and sudden events such as heart attacks and strokes. The health professionals at the other end of the telephone line can guide you through dealing with fevers, simple infections, or other daily health concerns and also tell you when a visit to a doctor or the hospital is really called for.

Don’t hesitate to try out the Info-Santé line by calling 811, pressing 9 for service in English, and asking your questions. You are likely to be pleasantly surprised by the courtesy and efficiency of the person on the other end of the line.

Sheila Eskenazi, President, English Communities Committee of the CSSS des Sommets