



A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO CARE ON THE CENTRAL ISLAND

Health Care on the Island

2026 EDITION

Hospitals, specialists, and getting to care, from Port Alberni to the Cowichan Valley.

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WELCOME

The question everyone asks

We're Travis and Kiel Bach, two brothers who've spent more than two decades living and working across the Central Island. When people plan a move here, health care is the worry that comes up more than any other: what's nearby, what you'd have to travel for, and how hard it is to find a family doctor.

So we put together the full picture: the hospitals and clinics community by community, the care you'd head to Victoria or Vancouver for, how people get there, and how to get set up when you arrive. It is a starting point, not medical advice, so always confirm the current details. Questions about a specific area? That's where we come in.

WHAT THIS GUIDE COVERS

- ✓ Hospitals, ERs and urgent care in every community, plus what each one does.
- ✓ Specialists and specialized programs, here and in Victoria and Vancouver.
- ✓ Travelling for care, the cost help available, and getting connected when you land.

YOUR ISLAND TEAM



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THE BIG PICTURE

How care works here

Care on the Island is layered. Most of what you need is close to home; the more specialized it gets, the farther you may travel. Here is the whole system on one page, so the rest makes sense.

Everyday care. Your family doctor or nurse practitioner, walk-in and urgent care clinics, and your pharmacist. HealthLink BC at 8-1-1 gives free nurse advice any time, day or night.

Your regional hospital. Nanaimo, Duncan, or Port Alberni handle emergencies, surgery, maternity, and most acute care close to home. For a true emergency, you call 9-1-1.

The Island referral centre, Victoria. The specialized work: complex heart care, cancer radiation, neurosurgery, major trauma, high-risk births, and the sickest children. Most people go south only when they need this level of care.

The mainland, Vancouver. A small set of the most specialized procedures, like heart transplants and some children's care, happen off-Island. Rare, but worth knowing it exists.

A WORD ON COVERAGE

B.C.'s Medical Services Plan (MSP) covers doctor and hospital care. After you move, coverage starts after a wait of the rest of your arrival month plus two more months, so carry private insurance to bridge it. Prescriptions are helped by PharmaCare; routine dental, vision, and more are not covered (see the dental and optical page).

HOSPITALS AND URGENT CARE

Where to go, by community

Start with where each community turns for care. Drive times are approximate and door-to-door.

OCEANSIDE AND THE NORTH

Parksville and Qualicum Oceanside Health Centre

Urgent care for serious but not life-threatening problems, plus a lab, medical imaging, mental health supports, and primary care by appointment. Walk-in only, open daily into the evening, with no overnight beds.

No emergency department: true emergencies go to Nanaimo, Port Alberni, or Comox.
Serves Bowser, Qualicum Bay, Errington, Coombs, Nanoose and the Oceanside coast.

Port Alberni West Coast General Hospital

A full hospital with a 24-hour emergency department (recently expanded), acute care, and diagnostics. It anchors care for the Alberni Valley and the west coast, including Tofino and Ucluelet.

Nearest ER for the west; a satellite dialysis unit runs here.
About an hour and fifteen from Nanaimo over Highway 4.

NANAIMO, THE HUB

Nanaimo Nanaimo Regional General Hospital

The Central Island's anchor hospital: a 24/7 emergency department, surgery, intensive care, maternity, diagnostic imaging and lab. It is the primary hospital for the whole central Island, and where specialists and programs are concentrated.

Specialized programs include a renal dialysis centre, a multiple sclerosis clinic, and a cancer clinic for chemotherapy.
Urgent and primary care centres in the city help when you have no family doctor.

HOSPITALS AND URGENT CARE

The south, and what's coming

NANAIMO AND AROUND

Ladysmith Ladysmith Community Health Centre

Urgent care for non-life-threatening concerns, mental health and substance-use supports, and a neurological rehabilitation outpatient program. Walk-in only, with no emergency department.

Emergencies go to Nanaimo or to Duncan, both close by.

Handy for Saltair, Chemainus and Crofton at the north end of the valley.

COWICHAN AND THE SOUTH

Duncan Cowichan District Hospital

The valley's hospital, with a 24-hour emergency department, intensive care, diagnostics, rehabilitation, and specialty outpatient clinics. It serves Duncan, the seaside villages, the lake, and the south Cowichan.

Serves Chemainus, Cobble Hill, Cowichan Bay, Crofton, Lake Cowichan, Mill Bay and Shawnigan Lake.

Mill Bay and the south sit close to Victoria's hospitals too, just over the Malahat.

COMING IN 2027: QUW'UTSUN VALLEY HOSPITAL

A new 204-bed hospital is replacing the Cowichan District Hospital, expected to open for patients in 2027. It brings seven operating rooms, an expanded emergency and birthing unit, pediatric spaces, more imaging, a rooftop helipad, and a dedicated inpatient psychiatry unit. It is set to be the first fully electric hospital in B.C.

SPECIALIZED CARE

What you head south for

For the most specialized care, the Island's referral hospitals are in Victoria, about an hour or so south of the valley. Most people only make the trip when they need this level of care.

Royal Jubilee Hospital Victoria · the specialist centre

The Island's referral centre for burn, cancer, cardiac, mental health, renal, respiratory and vascular care. Its Heart Health program is one of the country's leading cardiac programs, with catheterization and electrophysiology labs handling everything short of heart transplants. BC Cancer's Victoria centre, where radiation therapy is given, sits on the grounds.

This is the Island's home for complex heart care and cancer radiation.

Victoria General Hospital Victoria · trauma, brains, and babies

The Island's major trauma centre, taking serious injuries from across Vancouver Island by helicopter. It runs the regional stroke program and neurosurgery, and is the regional maternity centre with neonatal and pediatric intensive care for high-risk births and critically ill children.

Major trauma, neurosurgery, high-risk pregnancies and the sickest newborns are cared for here.

WHEN CARE MEANS THE MAINLAND

A few of the most specialized procedures happen in Vancouver: heart transplants and some transplant care at St. Paul's Hospital, and complex children's care at BC Children's Hospital. It is rare, and travel and accommodation help exists for it (next pages).

GETTING THERE

Distances, ferries and flights

Knowing how you'd actually reach care matters as much as where it is. Here is the lay of the land from the Central Island.

To Nanaimo. The hub hospital is central: roughly 30 minutes from Parksville, 25 from Ladysmith, and a little over an hour from Port Alberni or Duncan.

To Victoria. For the specialist hospitals, the south Cowichan is closest, about 35 to 50 minutes over the Malahat; Nanaimo is around an hour and twenty. Build in a buffer, since the Malahat can back up or close.

To the mainland. BC Ferries runs from Departure Bay and Duke Point. The Hullo passenger ferry reaches downtown Vancouver in about 75 minutes. Harbour Air seaplanes and Helijet fly across, and the Nanaimo (YCD) and Comox (YQQ) airports add more options.

In an emergency. You call 9-1-1. Serious cases are stabilized locally and transferred to Victoria, often by air ambulance, so you do not have to arrange the trip yourself.

THE PART NOBODY MENTIONS

Help with the cost of travelling for care

If you are referred to a specialist outside your community, there is genuine help with the travel. Most people do not know it exists, so it is worth keeping in mind.

The Travel Assistance Program (TAP BC). Gives fare discounts on BC Ferries, and on air and rail, for B.C. residents travelling within the province for physician-referred, non-emergency specialist care not available in their own community. Your doctor or specialty clinic completes the form. It is a discount, not a refund, so meals, fuel and accommodation are still yours to cover.

Medical Assured Loading. For TAP patients driving to a critical appointment, BC Ferries can guarantee a spot so you are not waiting in the lineup.

Hope Air. Provides free flights for people who qualify and need to travel by air for medical appointments.

Cancer and accommodation help. The Canadian Cancer Society offers travel and lodging support, and a medical-accommodation listing helps you find rooms at a reduced medical rate near the hospitals.

GOOD TO KNOW

Ask your specialist's office or a hospital social worker about TAP and accommodation help the moment a referral comes up; the forms are quick, and a little planning pays off.

GETTING CONNECTED

Setting up when you arrive

Enrol in MSP first. Apply for the Medical Services Plan as soon as you arrive. Coverage begins after a wait of the rest of your arrival month plus two more, so line up private insurance to bridge that gap, and get your BC Services Card.

Get on the family-doctor list. Register with the provincial Health Connect Registry to be matched with a family doctor or nurse practitioner when one comes available. This can take time right across the Island, so get on the list early.

In the meantime. You are not stuck. Urgent and primary care centres, walk-in clinics and virtual-care services can see you, pharmacists can now prescribe for many minor ailments, and HealthLink BC at 8-1-1 gives 24/7 nurse advice. For emergencies, it is always 9-1-1.

THREE NUMBERS WORTH SAVING

8-1-1 HealthLink BC, free nurse advice any hour. 9-1-1 for emergencies. Health Connect Registry, to find a family doctor: healthlinkbc.ca/health-connect-registry.

AGING WELL HERE

Care and support for seniors

Many people moving here are thinking about the next twenty years. The Island has a full range of support for aging well, from a little help at home to full residential care.

Home support. Help with daily tasks like bathing and dressing, and home nursing, so you can stay in your own home longer. This is the first step for most people.

Assisted living. Your own apartment with meals, housekeeping and some personal care on hand, for people who are largely independent but want support nearby.

Long-term care. Around-the-clock professional care in a residential home, for higher and more complex needs. Communities like Nanaimo, Parksville, Ladysmith and the Cowichan all have homes, with subsidized rates set by income alongside private options.

HOW TO START, AND WHAT TO EXPECT

You do not need a doctor's referral. Call Island Health's Community Access Line for the Central Island (250-739-5749 or 1-877-734-4101) and a case manager will assess needs and guide placement.

Subsidized long-term care can have a wait, so it is worth understanding the options before you need them. Mobility equipment like walkers and wheelchairs is generally your own cost.

HAVING A BABY HERE

Maternity and newborn care

Starting or growing a family is a common reason for the move. Here is how maternity care works on the Central Island.

Your care provider. Both family doctors and registered midwives are covered by MSP, and midwives attend home or hospital births for low-risk pregnancies. Connect with a provider early, since the first weeks of pregnancy matter for screening.

Where babies are born. On the Central Island, deliveries happen at Nanaimo Regional General Hospital and at the Cowichan District Hospital in Duncan. Parksville's Oceanside centre does not do births, and west-coast families generally come to Nanaimo.

When it is higher risk. Victoria General Hospital is the regional centre for high-risk pregnancies and premature babies, with neonatal and pediatric intensive care. Some families travel there, or to the mainland, for that level of care.

GETTING STARTED

Find a maternity provider as soon as you know, ask whether a clinic is taking maternity patients, and register with the Health Connect Registry if you do not have a family doctor. Both midwives and doctors are no cost under MSP.

MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTIONS

Support when you need it

Mental-health and substance-use support runs alongside the rest of the system, with both crisis help and ongoing care.

In a crisis. If someone is in danger, call 9-1-1. For urgent mental-health support any time, the 9-8-8 Suicide Crisis Helpline (call or text) and the province's 310-6789 line (no area code) offer free, confidential help.

Ongoing care. Island Health provides community mental-health and substance-use services across the region, and several communities, including Ladysmith and the Oceanside centre, have local supports built in. Your family doctor or a walk-in can refer you.

Worth knowing. Counselling from private counsellors and psychologists is generally not covered by MSP, so extended benefits or sliding-scale and community services fill that gap. Royal Jubilee in Victoria houses the Island's psychiatric emergency services.

NUMBERS TO KEEP

9-8-8 Suicide Crisis Helpline, call or text. 310-6789 (no area code) for the BC mental-health support line. 8-1-1 for HealthLink BC nurse advice. 9-1-1 in an emergency.

THE GAPS IN COVERAGE

Dental, optical and private care

MSP covers doctors and hospitals, but a good deal sits outside it. Knowing what you pay for helps you plan, especially in the gap before coverage starts.

Dental. Routine dental is not covered by MSP and is paid privately or through extended benefits. The federal Canadian Dental Care Plan may help uninsured residents under income thresholds, and the BC Healthy Kids program helps lower-income families with children's dental and eyewear.

Eyes. Routine eye exams are covered for children under 19 and adults 65 and over, and when medically necessary, but not for most adults 19 to 64. Glasses and contacts are not covered. Optometrists are widely available in every community.

Prescriptions. Most drug costs run through PharmaCare, and registering for Fair PharmaCare ties your coverage to your income. Hearing aids and many therapies (massage, chiropractic, physiotherapy) are also generally out of pocket.

Private clinics. For faster access, private MRI and diagnostic clinics operate on the Island and the mainland, typically several hundred to over a thousand dollars per scan. They are an option, not a requirement.

WORTH KNOWING

What nobody tells you

The family-doctor wait is a fact. It is the same across the Island, so register the day you arrive and lean on walk-ins, urgent care and pharmacists in the meantime.

Emergencies are stabilized, then moved. Local ERs handle the urgent part, then transfer complex cases to Victoria. That system works well; it just means the specialist care is south.

Radiation means Victoria, for now. Cancer chemotherapy is given in Nanaimo, but radiation is in Victoria until Nanaimo's new cancer centre opens later this decade.

The Malahat is the one variable. Most trips south are easy, but the mountain highway to Victoria can back up or close, so leave a buffer for appointments.

Coverage is not instant. Plan for the MSP wait when you move, and remember ambulance trips carry a fee.

CARE AT A GLANCE

Each community, side by side

A quick comparison of where each community turns for care, and the rough drive to the hub and to Victoria's specialists. Times are approximate.

COMMUNITY	NEAREST ER	URGENT CARE	TO NANAIMO	TO VICTORIA
NORTH				
Bowser	Nanaimo	Oceanside ~30m	~50m	~2h
Qualicum Beach	Nanaimo	Oceanside ~10m	~35m	~1h45
Parksville	Nanaimo	In town	~30m	~1h40
Nanoose Bay	Nanaimo	Oceanside ~15m	~20m	~1h30
CENTRAL				
Lantzville	Nanaimo	Nanaimo ~12m	~12m	~1h30
Nanaimo	In town	In town	0m	~1h20
Yellow Point	Nanaimo	Nanaimo ~25m	~25m	~1h10
Port Alberni	In town	In town	~1h15	~2h25
SOUTH				
Ladysmith	Nanaimo / Duncan	In town	~25m	~1h05
Chemainus	Duncan	Duncan ~15m	~35m	~1h
Duncan	In town	In town	~50m	~50m
Mill Bay	Duncan	Duncan ~20m	~1h	~35m
Lake Cowichan	Duncan	Duncan ~30m	~50m	~1h10

ER = emergency department. Urgent care handles serious but non-life-threatening needs; it is not an ER.

HOW WE HELP

Health is part of the fit

Where you land changes how close care is, day to day. We can point you to communities by how near and how connected they are to hospitals, clinics, and the run to Victoria, and to the pockets where you can walk to a clinic. We are guides, not medical advisers, but knowing the full picture is half the decision.

TALK IT THROUGH WITH US



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Book a 20-minute call, or explore listings and neighbourhood guides at bachrealestate.ca

PLEASE NOTE

This guide is a general, at-a-glance overview to help you plan, not medical, financial, or legal advice. Hospitals, programs, services, drive times and coverage rules are current at the time of writing and they change, so please confirm the latest before you act, with Island Health, HealthLink BC at 8-1-1, and gov.bc.ca. For emergencies, call 9-1-1.

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