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Share the Wellness Tip

Urgent Care Center vs. Emergency Room

Emergency services provide expert care to save lives, but they're also places people seek treatment for mysterious symptoms or when most doctors' offices are closed.

But patients who need immediate help have another option to consider: urgent care centers. Urgent care centers and hospital emergency departments offer some of the same services. They differ in several important ways, though. Understanding those differences can help you choose the most appropriate care.

What Is an Urgent Care Center?

An urgent care center does not provide the full range of services offered by hospital emergency rooms. However, most urgent care centers do have X-ray and lab facilities. An increasing number have on-site pharmacies as well.

Urgent care centers are designed to treat medical problems that require prompt attention, but are not life-threatening. For instance, broken bones, sprains, cuts, even fevers and infections all can be treated at an urgent care center. Many urgent care centers also provide routine medical care, such as flu shots, wellness checkups and school physicals.

Most urgent care centers are open evenings and weekends. They also see patients on a walk-in basis. And waiting time can be shorter than in an emergency room. In an ER, life-threatening conditions are treated first. Less serious cases receive lower priority.

When to Go to the Emergency Room

Though an urgent care center can meet many needs, it is not always the best choice. Go directly to an emergency room for any of the following problems.

- You are having trouble breathing.
- You are suffering uncontrolled bleeding.
- You are experiencing chest pain or other symptoms of a heart attack.

If you have any doubts about where you should go, head to the ER.

Texas: To find an in-network Urgent Care Center or Retail Health Clinic, use the Provider Finder tool on our website at bcbstx.com or call Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Texas at 800-810-Blue (2583).

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010, Discovery Health

