

# A Family Caregiver's Guide to Urgent Care Centers

Urgent care centers help fill the gap between a doctor's office and a hospital's emergency room (ER). They provide treatment for medical problems such as a sudden illness or injuries that need attention right away but are not life-threatening emergencies.

This guide includes basic information about urgent care centers. It is written to help you understand options for immediate care when your family member's doctor is not available or you cannot get an appointment right away. It does not replace the advice of your family member's doctor.

## About Urgent Care Centers

A person might go to an urgent care center for a medical problem such as a:

- ▶ sprained ankle or wrist
- ▶ cut finger
- ▶ painful sore throat
- ▶ sinus or urinary tract infection
- ▶ rash
- ▶ headache
- ▶ insect bite
- ▶ infected toe
- ▶ upset stomach

These are just examples of the kinds of medical problems urgent care centers generally treat. But staff at one urgent care center may decide that a patient with an injury needs to go to the ER. Staff at another center may decide to provide treatment right there. Sometimes this choice depends on how serious the problem is and if the health care provider has experience treating it. Most urgent care centers can take X-rays, do blood work, and perform other common tests.



A person should NOT go to an urgent care center for severe breathing problems, chest pains, uncontrolled bleeding, or other symptoms of a life-threatening emergency. If your family member has any of these problems, call 911 or go to the nearest hospital ER right away.

The *Next Step in Care* free [guide to the Emergency Room](#) for family caregivers has a list of medical problems that need ER treatment. It also has advice about what to bring and what to expect.

---

Staff at urgent care centers will assess your family member's medical problem and may provide some symptom relief. They will also say whether your family member needs to see his or her doctor for follow-up care.

The urgent care center may instead want your family member to go to the nearest ER. This may happen if the medical problem is very serious or if the urgent care staff feels they cannot provide the right kind of treatment. If your family member needs to go to the ER, the urgent care center may help make the arrangements to get there right away.

## When There Is a Medical Emergency

Some people refuse to go to an ER. They may say that their symptoms are not so bad or that they do not want to wait in the ER. Others are afraid that if they go to the ER they will be admitted to the hospital and then to a nursing home. Many older people and those with chronic illnesses feel this way. It may be easier to persuade your family member to get treatment at an urgent care center. Urgent care centers tend to be quieter and less busy than an ER.

It is important to know that if you employ a home health aide through an agency, he or she may be required to call 911 in a medical emergency. But if you hire the aide yourself, you can decide what to do and where to go for medical problems. For instance, you might ask the aide to call you before taking your family member to either the ER or an urgent care center.

## Types of Urgent Care Centers

Urgent care centers are called many different names and offer a range of services:



It is a good idea to ask whether the urgent care center is part of a hospital or health care system. This can be important if your family member gets regular care through one system or needs to go to an ER or be admitted to a hospital in the system.

---

- ▶ Some are described as “walk-in,” “drop-in,” “urgent,” or “immediate” care centers. Some centers are known by brand names, like Fastmed or Urgicare. Each state has rules about how these centers work.
- ▶ Some urgent care centers treat just certain kinds of medical problems. For instance, some centers are only for children. Others are for adults with orthopedic (bone and joint) problems. Sometimes a hospital has a center only for its own patients, such as a cancer hospital that requires a referral from the doctor.
- ▶ Many pharmacies, supermarkets, or other retail stores offer some types of urgent care. These places are often good for getting a flu shot or having your blood pressure checked. They also sell over-the-counter medications for colds or other short-term medical problems. But these stores are not set up to deal with more serious medical problems.

It is easy to get confused about urgent care centers. To learn more, go to the Urgent Care Association of America at <http://www.ucaoa.org/index.php>.

## How to Find an Urgent Care Center

The best time to find an urgent care center is before you need it. Here are some ways to find urgent care centers near you:

- ▶ Ask your family member’s doctor about local urgent care centers. The doctor may recommend certain centers for your family member.
- ▶ To find local centers, look in the phone book or search the Internet for “urgent care centers” in your zip code.
- ▶ Make a list of four or five nearby urgent care centers. See how long it takes to get to each one. If you cannot visit in person, ask the center to mail you a brochure.

- ▶ Make a folder of local urgent care centers, with maps and directions.
- ▶ Call ahead before you go to an urgent care center. Sometimes the information on its website is out of date.

## Questions to Ask Before Going to an Urgent Care Center

### Q. When is the center open?

Urgent care centers set their own hours. Most, but not all, are open in the evening and on weekends. Make sure you know the hours it is open. This way you will not waste time going to a center in the middle of the night and finding out it is closed. By law ERs must be open 24/7 (all the time).



When is the center open?

What professionals are on staff?

How long is the average wait time?

Does the urgent care center accept insurance?

Does the urgent care center provide medications?

---

### Q. What professionals are on staff?

Urgent care centers may not have doctors on duty at all times. While some centers are staffed by family physicians or doctors with ER training, others only have doctors “on call” (such as a radiologist to read X-rays). Urgent care centers may be staffed by nurse practitioners or physician assistants trained to handle common medical problems. Their care might include doing blood work, giving X-rays, and providing oxygen.

### Q. How long is the average wait time?

At urgent care centers, there is often just a short wait to see the doctor, nurse practitioner, or physician assistant. Short waits can be very important when caring for an older person.

In busy ERs, patients are triaged (the most serious cases are seen first). This means that if your family member’s illness is not the most serious, you might have to wait in the ER for many hours.

### Q. Does the urgent care center accept insurance?

Urgent care centers accept many insurance plans. It is a good idea to find out ahead of time if your family member’s health plan has



Ask an urgent care center about its billing. If your family member does not have health insurance, then he or she may be billed at a higher rate. Even though an ER must treat all patients who show up, ER treatment is not free.

---

a contract with an urgent care center. If you go to an urgent care center that does not have such a contract, there might be higher fees for an “out-of-network” provider. Sometimes people go to an out-of-network urgent care center if the “in-network” one is far from the family member’s home.

It is important to know that urgent care centers do not have to treat everyone. This is different from a hospital ER, which is required by law to assess and, as needed, stabilize and treat everyone who seeks care – whether or not they can afford to pay. But urgent care centers are covered by antidiscrimination laws. They cannot refuse to see patients because of race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation.

#### **Q. Does the urgent care center provide medications?**

Doctors at urgent care centers can write prescriptions to fill at your pharmacy. In some states, nurse practitioners and physician assistants are allowed to write prescriptions at urgent care centers. Some urgent care centers can also give patients common medications like antibiotics (to treat infections). Some urgent care centers will not prescribe pain medications.



You can save time and reduce anxiety – for you, as well as your family member – when you plan ahead and know when to use an urgent care center.

---

## **What to Do After Going to an Urgent Care Center**

Tell your family member’s doctor that you went to an urgent care center, why, and what treatment and medications were given. This is very important as the center might not send information about the visit to your family member’s doctor.

Tell the urgent care center and your family member’s doctor about the quality of care you received. This helps everyone know what to do the next time there are medical problems.