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Article Link: <http://www.webmd.com/a-to-z-guides/Better-Care-at-Lower-Costs-Do-I-Need-to-Go-to-the-Emergency-Room>

Better Care at Lower Costs

Do I Need to Go to the Emergency Room?

Hospital emergency rooms (ERs) are set up to focus on medical emergencies. They are not set up to focus on routine health care. If you go to the ER for a problem that is not an emergency:

It will cost a lot more than it would at your doctor's office or a "walk-in" clinic. A trip to the ER for an earache, for example, may cost three to four times as much as it would at your doctor's office.

You will probably spend a lot more time there than you would at a walk-in clinic or doctor's office.

You will get care from a doctor who has probably never seen you before. It's always best to get as much of your care as you can from a doctor who knows and understands you.

Go to the ER if you think you are having a medical emergency. That's what the ER is for. Otherwise, call your doctor's office first, or go to a walk-in clinic. It will save you money and time.

How do I know when it's an emergency?

There are few clear rules about what is an emergency and what isn't. Most doctors would agree on a short list of problems that should always be treated as emergencies—chest pain that could be a heart attack, not being able to breathe, severe and uncontrolled bleeding, stroke symptoms, and a few others.

Most health problems are not emergencies. You may want to take care of the problem right away because you feel sick or uncomfortable, but nothing bad is going to happen to you if you wait a bit. Then again, you don't always know that for sure. Some problems that seem minor can become serious if you ignore them. And it may be even harder to know what to do when a child is sick.

One good question to ask yourself is, "Am I thinking about going to the ER because it's *convenient* or because it's *necessary*?" If you are choosing the ER because you can get in without an appointment, keep in mind the high price you will pay for that convenience. And you may have other options. You can always call your doctor's office or a nurse line for help.

What if a problem happens on a weekend or at night?

If you think you are having a medical emergency, go to the ER.

If you don't think the problem is an emergency:

Use the "Search" feature to look up your problem on this Web site, and read the information about when to call a doctor. See if there is home treatment you can try.

Call your doctor's office and see if there is a number to call for after-hours service.

Call a nurse line for advice. The nurse can help you decide whether you need to get help now or whether it is safe to wait.

Go to a walk-in clinic (if one is open).

Go to the ER if you feel the problem cannot wait until your doctor's office or a walk-in clinic is open.

What is a "walk-in" clinic?

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Walk-in clinics are often called "minor emergency," "urgent care," or "immediate care" centers. They deal with all kinds of health problems and are often open in the evenings and on weekends. You do not need an appointment.

These types of clinics can be a great option when:

You can't or don't want to wait for an appointment at your doctor's office.

You don't need the level of care an ER provides.

Care at a walk-in clinic costs a lot less than care for the same problem at an ER.

If it turns out you are having a true medical emergency, a walk-in clinic will send you to the ER.

Unless you have a walk-in clinic in your neighborhood or already know where one is, it may be hard to find one when you need it. So, at your next doctor visit, ask your doctor to recommend one. Check with your health plan to see if it offers better coverage at some clinics than others.

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