

Live Well, Work Well

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Emergency Room or Urgent Care?

More than 10% of all emergency room visits could have been better addressed in either an urgent care facility or a doctor's office. If you're suddenly faced with symptoms of an illness or injury, how can you determine which facility is most appropriate for your condition?

Emergency Room (ER)

Emergency rooms are equipped to handle life-threatening injuries and illnesses and other serious medical conditions. An emergency is a condition that may cause loss of life or permanent or severe disability if not treated immediately. You should go directly to the nearest emergency room if you experience any of the following:

- Chest pain
- Shortness of breath
- Severe abdominal pain following an injury
- Uncontrollable bleeding
- Confusion or loss of consciousness, especially after a head injury
- Poisoning or suspected poisoning
- Serious burns, cuts or infections
- Inability to swallow
- Seizures
- Paralysis
- Broken bones

Patients at the emergency room are sorted, or triaged, according to the seriousness of their condition. For example, a patient with severe injuries from a car accident would likely be seen before a child with an ear infection, even if the child was brought in first.

Those who go to the ER with relatively minor injuries or illnesses often have to wait more than an hour to be seen, depending on the severity of the other patients' conditions. Often they could have been seen more quickly at an urgent care facility.

Urgent Care

Urgent care centers are usually located in clinics or hospitals, and, like emergency rooms, offer after-hours care. Unlike emergency rooms, they are not equipped to handle life-threatening situations. Rather, they handle conditions that require immediate attention—those where delaying treatment could cause serious problems or discomfort.

Some examples of conditions that require urgent care are these:

- Ear infections
- Sprains
- Urinary tract infections
- Vomiting
- High fever

Urgent care centers are usually more cost-effective than ERs for these conditions. In addition, the waiting time in urgent care centers is usually much shorter. Choosing the appropriate place of care can not only ensure prompt medical attention but will also help reduce any unnecessary expenses.