

Urgent care questions

How to use urgent care centers to your advantage

Urgent care centers have been part of the health care landscape since the 1970s but only in the past decade have they begun to experience a dramatic surge in popularity.

Many reasons are behind the growth in popularity, but two stand out. First, urgent care centers deliver many services that cannot be provided in a primary care physician's office. Second, people appreciate the fact they have access to these services outside of normal business hours and without having to make an appointment.

"Urgent care centers are not ideal for every medical situation," says Dr. Stephen Perkins, vice president Medical Affairs at UPMC Health Plan. "But there are times when urgent care centers have advantages that make sense for health care consumers."

Smart Business spoke with Perkins about urgent care centers and how health care consumers can use them to their advantage.

Are there services that urgent care centers provide that may not be available in a primary care physician's office?

Yes. These include such things as care for minor fractures, and certain diagnostic tests, such as chest X-rays. Other non-emergency conditions that can be treated at an urgent care center include a twisted or sprained ankle, cuts, lacerations, general wound care, animal bites, and minor skin rashes. Earaches, back pain and sore throats can also be treated at urgent care centers.

If you can go to urgent care centers, why would you need to have a primary care physician?

In terms of health care, it is always preferable to have a personal physician. It is best if that physician is someone who practices in a primary care specialty and who has a holistic approach to a patient's medical care and needs.

Use of urgent care centers is not an alternative to having a personal physician. Urgent care centers are intended to be places where patients can get needed medical services when their personal physician is not available or unable to provide the specific service.

Because urgent care centers are more convenient than hospital emergency rooms for many clinical conditions, and



Dr. Stephen Perkins

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because the services they provide are of high quality at a lower out-of-pocket cost, they are a smart choice in many instances.

What factors could influence making use of an urgent care center?

If you determine that an urgent care makes sense, you might appreciate some of the advantages, such as the fact that most insurance companies have lists of urgent care centers where its members can receive care as a covered benefit. In addition, going to an urgent care center rather than to an emergency room for acute non-emergency care is less expensive and frees up emergency rooms for more life-threatening cases.

Can an urgent care center sometimes be a better choice than a personal physician?

Because there is no need for an appointment and urgent care centers often have more flexible hours — including nights and weekends — than most physician offices, they often make sense. However, many physicians now offer extended office hours, so it is best to find out what hours you may be seen by your physician before making any health care choices.

Urgent care centers are also often convenient for people who are traveling or are some distance from home when an emergency arises.

By using urgent care centers, patients avoid the long lines they would encounter at emergency rooms. Urgent care centers also tend to have more locations, which makes them more convenient for many.

Some urgent care centers are affiliated with existing health care delivery systems. These centers may also have an affiliation with your primary care physician and, therefore, make it easier for your primary care physician to get a report of any action taken or medication prescribed. Ideally, an urgent care center should be an extension of your primary care physician's office.

Are all urgent care centers the same?

Urgent care centers should not be confused with convenient care clinics, many of which are located in retail pharmacies, do not have a physician on staff and generally provide lower-level health care services, such as administering flu shots. It is important to understand that being treated by a doctor who knows you is always the preferable choice for those who want the highest level of care. Receiving treatment from your doctor — or, when necessary, following your doctor's advice to go to an urgent care center or emergency room — is often your best option.

When is it not a good idea to use an urgent care center?

Urgent care centers are not ideal for all situations. Emergencies that are potentially life-threatening are best treated in an emergency room. These would include a heart attack or severe chest pain, a major injury or burn, poisoning, severe bleeding, passing out, being unable to catch your breath, being unable to move limbs or a loss of feeling in them, or a head or spine injury.

Urgent care centers work best when used as a complement to primary care, providing service when a timely visit to a physician's office is not available, or after regular office hours when the only other alternative would be an emergency room visit. <<

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