

The ER versus urgent care

LI RESIDENTS INCREASINGLY HAVE A CHOICE ABOUT WHERE TO GET HEALTHCARE

By Liza N. Burby



You've suffered a sprain, but the thought of spending hours in the emergency room seems equally painful. Or, you think you have strep, but it's Saturday, and you don't want to wait until your doctor's office hours to start a course of antibiotics.

Increasingly, an alternative to both the ER and primary care providers is an urgent care center — a walk-in clinic that provides care for illnesses and injuries that are not life-threatening. The appeal is that they have extended office hours and are open on weekends and holidays.

"Urgent care is convenient access to unscheduled medical care, where the wait time is usually no more than 15 minutes, and most patients are out within the hour," said Walter LeStrange, chief operating officer of ProHEALTH Urgent

Care Centers, headquartered in Lake Success. "The most common conditions treated are generally upper respiratory — flu, common cold, pneumonia — and muscular skeletal — sprains, strains and also fractures that can be diagnosed and stabilized and sent to an orthopedic surgeon with the X-ray," he said.

There are an estimated 7,100 urgent care centers in the United States today, according to the Urgent Care Association of America, with 445 in New York State alone.

Urgent care is about treating and releasing patients, said Dr. Barry Rosenthal, chairman of the Emergency Medicine Department at Winthrop University Hospital in Mineola. "There's an absolutely much longer wait if one comes to the emergency room than if they go to urgent care most of the time," he said. "Urgent care is also a more placid environment than the emergency room, where there's usually an extra layer of stress."

No 24-Hour Care

However, unlike the ER, urgent care is not available 24 hours a day, said Dr. William Gluckman, a board member and spokesperson for the Urgent Care Association of America who runs an urgent care center in Morris Plains, N.J. However, "there are also free-standing emergency departments that are generally open 24/7 and have the advanced CAT scan and radiology capabilities of the emergency room," he said. "The only difference is that they don't have a place to admit patients, so they would have to transfer them to a hospital."

Rosenthal said that urgent care centers are best used for people with minor injuries or illnesses, "but if you have chest pain, shortness of breath, severe abdominal pain with nausea and vomiting, severe headache, very high fevers for a few days and are getting weak, or if you're elderly, I would not recommend an urgent care, which could delay necessary diagnostic studies."

He also advises against relying on urgent care centers for primary care as that could interfere with continuity of care. LeStrange agrees. Urgent care "is not meant to replace your primary care doctor, who will have your medical history, especially if you suffer from chronic, long-term conditions," he said.

Some urgent care centers, like ProHEALTH, for instance, have an integrated care system so that electronic records can be shared with physicians in their network, LeStrange said.

In recent years, urgent care centers have sprung up across Long Island, with the number today estimated to be nearly 100, according to the association's urgent care locator on its website.

Choosing An Urgent Care

So how does a consumer choose which one to go to?

Dr. Jeffrey Schor, owner of PM Pediatrics and a founder of PM Pediatrics Management Group, based in Lake Success, suggests starting by asking certain questions, depending on what type care you're seeking:

- What is the urgent care center capable of doing?

- Does it have X-ray and other diagnostic equipment?
- Does it have laboratory capabilities for diagnosing illnesses like strep and the flu and doing blood work?
- What providers are available? Are they all physicians? Are they mostly physician assistants or nurse practitioners?
- Does the center have a plastic surgeon on premises or on call for facial lacerations that require stitches?
- Is the center prepared and knowledgeable enough to take care of children? “Many urgent care centers don’t have training in pediatric emergency care, and that’s an important distinguishing characteristic,” Schor said.
- What hours is the center open?

Another factor is cost.

LeStrange said that one benefit of an urgent care

center is that it’s often cheaper than the ER, but be sure to ask if the center will accept your insurance. “If you don’t have insurance, the fee is about \$100 per visit, and then a la carte for services needed,” he said.

Urgent care centers continue to grow in number on Long Island and elsewhere because they’re an important niche in the healthcare continuum, Gluckman said. “However, there’s still some confusion about what types of conditions can be treated in the urgent care versus the ER,” he added.

In fact, he said, “studies show that 30 percent of the

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cases that wind up in the emergency room could have been dealt with at the urgent care center.”

“The healthcare system works best when patients present in the right place,” Gluckman said. “So we can have that 30 percent save

their time and money [by going to an urgent care center] and then enable the emergency department to be able to focus on taking care of the acute problems they’re designed for.”

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