

When do I go – the emergency room, urgent care centers and retail clinics?



Do I need to go to the emergency room?

Hospital emergency rooms (ER) 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 more than it would at your doctor's office or an urgent care 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.¹
- You will probably spend more time there than you would in a clinic or doctor's office.
- You will get care from a doctor who has never seen you before. It is always best to get as much of your care as you can from a doctor who knows and understands you.

Flu, asthma flare-up, chest pain? Sometimes it's hard to tell when you should go to the emergency room and when you should visit the doctor.

See your primary care physician when you need treatment for chronic conditions or preventive care such as immunizations and checkups. This helps you build a relationship with your doctor, which can lead to better care. Your primary care physician is your key health advocate and can help you get well-coordinated care.

When it's an emergency

Your primary care provider can help you with most health problems. But if you or a family member has any of the following problems, visit the ER right away:

- chest pain
- loss of consciousness
- sudden slurred speech
- trouble breathing
- choking
- seizures
- uncontrolled bleeding
- poisoning
- severe burns

¹ "Better Care at Lower Costs," Healthwise, Inc. 2012

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Harvard Pilgrim Health Care includes Harvard Pilgrim Health Care and its affiliates, Harvard Pilgrim Health Care of New England and HPHC Insurance Company.

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 others.

One good question to ask is, "Am I 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. You can always call your doctor's office.

What are my options?

It is best to call your doctor to see if your doctor's practice has after-hours or urgent care options. If it isn't an emergency but your doctor is not available, retail and urgent care clinics offer treatment for patients who have illnesses or injuries that require immediate attention but are not life threatening. Call first. You may need a referral from your doctor, but a retail or urgent care facility may be a cost-effective alternative to the emergency room.

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> Retail Clinics

Harvard Pilgrim's network includes high-quality retail clinic providers.* These providers may give you added options for the treatment of relatively minor health care issues and as a complement to the array of health services options already available through Harvard Pilgrim's broad provider network. Retail medicine providers offer care and treatment for a specific number of acute primary services, such as pink eye, ear infections, strep throat, minor burns, poison ivy, and flu shots.

For example, a convenience care clinic, such as MinuteClinic*, which serves Eastern Massachusetts, offers low cost options for minor injuries and common illnesses when your doctor's office can't see you.

*Contracted retail clinic providers can be found in our online directory (www.harvardpilgrim.org) by searching under the specialty "Convenience Care Clinic."

> Urgent Care Centers

If you need services for the treatment of a medical issue that is more complex than can be managed in a retail clinic, Harvard Pilgrim contracts with a network of free standing urgent care providers.

Urgent Care Centers refer to a group of clinicians that offer care for the treatment of an acute or chronic illness or injury that is immediate in nature and requires professional attention but is not life threatening.

Urgent Care providers are an option for members when they are unable to be seen by their primary care physician for the minor illness. They are medical practices or facilities that are open to the general public and offer medical care without an appointment, but cannot be used for preventive or routine services, such as diabetes screening, pregnancy tests, heart screenings or school physicals. Urgent Care providers can be found in our online directory at www.harvardpilgrim.org/members by searching under the specialty of "Urgent Care Center."

The clinics are independent, freestanding facilities not connected or affiliated to a hospital. Care is provided by a physician, physician assistant, nurse practitioner or nurse who will provide treatment and make recommendations for follow-up care. After the appointment, a short note will be sent to your primary care provider notifying him or her of your treatment.

Questions about your coverage?

Call Member Services at (888) 333-4742 weekdays from 8:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., with extended hours until 7:30 p.m. on Mondays and Wednesdays. For TTY service, call (800) 637-8257.