

Your Health: Using the Emergency Room Wisely



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 may cost more.
- You will probably get care from a doctor who has never seen you before.
- Your problem may not be addressed, since the ER is set up for emergencies. So you may need to follow up with another doctor.

It's best to get as much of your care as you can from a doctor who knows you and your health history.

When to use the ER

Go to the ER if you think you are having a medical emergency. If it's not an emergency, call your doctor's office first or go to a walk-in clinic. It will save you money and time.

When is it an emergency?

Certain problems should always be treated as emergencies. These include:

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- Symptoms of a heart attack, such as chest pain or pressure or a strange feeling in the chest, back, jaw or arm.
- Severe difficulty breathing.
- Symptoms of a stroke, such as sudden numbness, tingling, weakness, or new trouble speaking or understanding.
- Severe bleeding.
- Severe accidents.

Many health problems are not emergencies.

Ask yourself, "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, remember it may cost a lot. And you may have to wait a long time before you are seen by a doctor.

You can call your doctor's office for help. Or, if a nurse line is available, you can call it and a nurse can help you decide whether you need to get help now or whether it is safe to wait.

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

If you think you are having a medical emergency, **call 911 or other emergency services immediately or go to the ER.** The ER is the safest and best place to get help if you think it is an emergency, no matter what time of day it is.

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

- Call your doctor's office and see if there is a number to call for after-hours service.
- Call a nurse line, if one is available, and ask for advice.
- 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?

Walk-in clinics deal with many health problems and are often open in the evenings and on weekends. You do not need an appointment.

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

These 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 think you need the level of care an ER provides.

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

Ask your doctor to recommend a clinic. Check with your health plan to see if it offers better coverage at some clinics than others.

Do you have any questions or concerns after reading this information? It's a good idea to write them down and take them to your next doctor visit.