

HEALTH FACTS

Using the Emergency Room: Knowing When to Go

Knowing when to go to the emergency room - and when to consider other options - can save you time and money.

Key points to keep in mind:

- Going to the emergency room is time-consuming and expensive.
- *Go to the ER immediately in an emergency ...* but in non-emergency situations, it's a good idea to consider other options.

Do you sometimes go to the emergency room

when it might not be an emergency? Many people do, but there are good reasons to stay away from the ER except in real emergencies.

For starters, patients who go to the ER for minor issues often have to wait a long time to be seen, since more serious cases take priority. The ER isn't a fun place to be when you're feeling ill, and you may have other options (see right) for getting treated faster.

Also, you'll almost certainly pay a steeper co-payment for going to the ER than for visiting your primary care doctor.



Unnecessary ER visits are expensive for you, because of the costly co-pays. But unnecessary visits to the ER also help to drive up health care costs, and this is part of what makes our health benefits expensive. A trip to the ER can be 4 or 5 times more costly than a visit to your primary care doctor's office.

If you need to go to the emergency room, go. In the event of a medical emergency, you should go to the emergency room without delay. See the text box at right for some situations where you should go to the ER immediately – as well as some situations where you may be able to wait or try another option, like the options outlined below:

Daytime Urgent Situation? Often, your primary care doctor can rearrange his or her schedule to make time for a patient with an urgent problem.

Urgent Care Centers. Many health plans cover treatment provided at area urgent care centers. Waiting times are often shorter at these facilities than in

the ER, particularly for minor injuries. Also, your co-pay is often lower for an urgent care center visit than for a trip to the ER.

Uncertain Whether You Need to Go to the ER? Health plans often offer 24-hour nurse lines which allow you to speak to a nurse for free by calling a 1-800 number. Sometimes talking to the nurse can help you figure out whether you need to go to the ER, or can wait.

Go to the ER immediately if you have:

- Chest or upper abdominal pain/pressure
- Coughing up or vomiting blood
- Suicidal or homicidal feelings
- Bleeding that doesn't stop after 10 minutes of direct pressure
- Severe or persistent vomiting
- Sudden severe pain
- Change in mental status
- Difficulty breathing, or shortness of breath
- Weakness or change in vision
- Fainting or sudden dizziness

Consider another option if you have:

- Colds, flu, cough
- Earaches
- Fever (unless you're having convulsions)
- Sprains
- Skin rashes
- STDs
- Insect stings
- Sunburns and minor burns

