

HEALTH CARE—URGENCY VERSUS EMERGENCY

By Shirley Merkle, director of Emergency Services, Overlake Hospital Medical Center

With many different kinds of health care providers to choose from, it is sometimes difficult to know what kind of provider is most appropriate for a given situation. When quick treatment is needed—whether it’s a child’s high fever or spouse’s chest pain—what level of care is appropriate? Two common options are urgent care and emergency care. Urgent-care clinics and hospital emergency departments were designed to serve very different needs, but they often work together to ensure that patients receive the right level of treatment at the right time.

Urgent-care clinics treat patients who have an illness or injury that requires attention within 48 hours and doesn’t appear to pose a serious health risk. If you or a family member has a single occurrence of a cold or ear infection, urgent care can be a good choice for quick treatment without an appointment. When you are sick and your primary doctor cannot see you urgently it is appropriate to ask your provider if you should go to an urgent care clinic or the emergency department.

Urgent-care visits are typically available on a walk-in basis and patients are treated and released relatively quickly. When the condition is less serious and an urgent-care visit makes sense, one benefit is the cost. Urgent-care visits typically cost less than emergency care, but this is dependent on the price of your health insurance co-pay or deductible. Urgent-care facilities have proliferated since the mid-1970s and there are now approximately 17,000 clinics operating in the United States.

Emergency departments (EDs), located within nearly all U.S. hospitals, have the staff, equipment and nearby resources to treat patients with serious or life-threatening emergencies, including heart attacks, strokes or major trauma. The best EDs are located within a hospital and are supported by the hospital’s surgical services and critical-care units, which



HELPFUL WEB SITES

For more information on urgent care and emergency care, visit www.overlakehospital.org.

For information on the warning signs of heart attack and stroke, visit www.americanheart.org.

can provide the additional care that patients might need. While most ED patients are treated and released the same day, many patients who visit an emergency department are admitted to the hospital for further treatment or observation.

As director of Overlake’s busy Emergency and Trauma Center, I see the role of our ED staff as stabilizing patients and then getting them where they need to go within the hospital, whether it’s to surgery, critical care or our stroke unit. With the kinds of serious conditions we treat here in the ED, we are often working against the clock to get patients the care they need fast. For many of our patients, seconds count in the delivery of care.

Physicians with special training or board certification in emergency medicine typically staff emergency

departments. In addition, emergency departments have access to multi-disciplinary health-care teams that can be mobilized in minutes to respond to patients with life-threatening conditions. Cardiologists, surgeons, neurologists and other specialists at the hospital are available to quickly evaluate patients, confer with other physicians and provide the best course of treatment for those with severe illnesses or injuries.

Urgent-care clinics are often equipped with several kinds of X-ray equipment that can help diagnose simple bone breaks and fractures. Emergency departments have a more extensive range of radiology tools—often cutting-edge equipment—within the department or nearby in the hospital. This gives them access to more sophisticated

diagnostics, which are especially critical when patients have suspicious but vague symptoms of a serious illness, such as weakness or shortness of breath.

In addition to the seriousness of the symptoms or suspected illness, age is another important factor to consider in determining urgent care versus emergency care. Many health professionals agree that urgent-care clinics are best suited for children and younger adults who do not have chronic illnesses. Adults over age 60 should err on the side of more comprehensive care and go to an emergency department with any urgent health concerns.

It is important to know where you can turn for care, especially when time is of the essence. In the case of any emergency or life-threatening condition, what’s most important to remember is to call 911. In addition to knowing various provider options, it’s also beneficial to familiarize yourself and your family members with the early warning signs for life-threatening conditions such as heart attack and stroke, so that if these early signs appear, you can take fast action in caring for yourself and those you love.