

Texas HealthBeat

Emergency Rooms: When to Go, When to Go Elsewhere

You hope it never happens in your family — worrisome symptoms prompting a midnight trip to the emergency room (ER). It is a time of uncertainty sometimes spent waiting several hours to see a doctor.

In a crowded ER, however, you are one of several patients with urgent or life-threatening conditions. In Texas, the number of ER patients increased 83 percent in 2000, according to a *Dallas Business Journal* report. Overcrowded hospitals have been forced to divert patients to other facilities to keep up with demand.

In many cases, a trip to the ER is avoidable. Many conditions seen in emergency departments can be treated in a physician's office or Urgent Care facility. Recognizing when a medical emergency exists and how to react to non-life-threatening symptoms can help reduce your chances of an ER visit.

Emergency and Urgent Care Defined

It may seem like there's little difference between these two words, but to ER medical staff, the difference between emergency and urgent means attending to a patient now or later. At PacifiCare, we have established the following definitions to explain the difference:

Emergency care is defined as health care services provided in a hospital emergency or comparable facility to evaluate and stabilize medical conditions which

come on suddenly and with severity. Symptoms include, but are not limited to, severe pain that leads a person with an average knowledge of medicine to believe his or her condition, sickness or injury requires immediate medical care and that failure to do so could result in:

Your primary care physician is your best advisor in helping direct you to the most appropriate medical action.

- placing the patient's health in serious jeopardy
- serious impairment to bodily functions
- serious dysfunction of any bodily organ or part
- serious disfigurement
- for pregnant women, serious jeopardy to the health of the fetus

If you or family members are experiencing symptoms that seem life threatening, call 911 or go to your nearest emergency room. As a PacifiCare member, you and your family are covered for any emergency care you need. All we ask is that you call your primary care physician (PCP) or PacifiCare by the next business day, or as soon as is reasonably possible, to alert us to the situation.

Urgent care is any condition that

requires medical intervention within 24 hours. When you or a family member experience a symptom that concerns you, the first thing you should do is call your PCP.

"Your PCP is your best advisor in helping direct you to the most appropriate medical action," says Paula Andrews, Service Quality program manager with PacifiCare of Texas. "That may include appropriate dosages of over-the-counter medication to help relieve symptoms overnight and a visit to the doctor the next day, or an after-hours trip to an Urgent Care facility in PacifiCare's contracting provider network. He or she can even tell you if you have an emergency on your hands."

A Measure of Prevention

It's important to remember routine care also goes a long way to helping you and your family avoid ER visits. Here are some tips:

- Make certain everyone in your family has an annual checkup with his or her PCP.
- Keep your children's immunizations up to date.
- People with chronic conditions, like diabetes or heart disease, should make sure they follow the treatment plan established by their doctor.

For more information about emergency and urgent care, refer to your Medical and Hospital Group Subscriber Agreement, contact Customer Service at (800) 825-9355, or e-mail your questions via our Web site at www.pacificare.com. **HB**

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