

# SHOULD I GO TO THE ER OR URGENT CARE?

➔ When you need prompt medical care, knowing when to go to the emergency room versus when to go to urgent care can be tricky — and the two often are incorrectly conflated. “We get patients coming to the emergency room who could be just as easily treated at an urgent care center, and urgent care often sends patients to the emergency room for an escalated level of care,” said Dorita Sondereker, Director of Emergency Services at Southern Hills Hospital and Medical Center. Learning when to go to which facility can help streamline the care process and save crucial time when you’re not well.

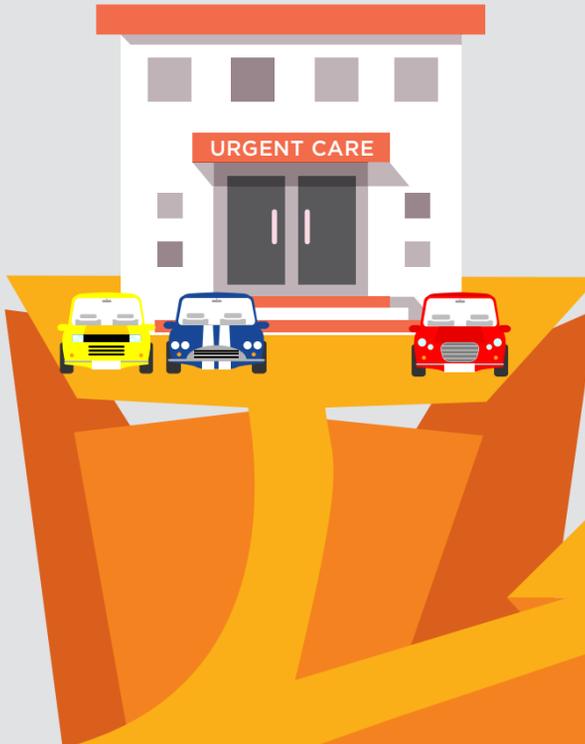
## WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE EMERGENCY ROOM AND URGENT CARE?

The qualifying difference between the two is the level of care each facility is able to provide. The emergency room can treat the entire spectrum of medical emergencies, from mild injuries to life-threatening medical conditions. Urgent care is able to stabilize patients with critical injury or illness and then transfer them to an emergency room for further treatment.

“For anything that could be treated by your general physician, go to urgent care. For anything that demands a higher level of care, go to the ER,” Sondereker said. “When you need medical care, either urgent care or the ER will be able to help and direct you appropriately, but going to the right one will help decrease the amount of time you’ll wait. If it’s very serious, you want to be at the ER as soon as possible.”

Both urgent care and the emergency room treat patients in order of severity, and the quality of care should be comparable between the two — i.e., going to the ER does not mean you’re getting better care than you would at an urgent care facility. Emergency rooms are open 24/7, whereas urgent care centers, while usually open late and on weekends, tend to have more limited hours.

Most urgent care centers are able to take X-rays, do lab work and stitch lacerations, but their hours are often more limited than emergency rooms.



**WHAT ABOUT 911?**  
If you’re alone, unable to drive yourself or unable to drive someone else to the ER, call 911. There are other instances when it is best to call an ambulance too, even if you’re near an ER and have someone able to drive you. Paramedics are able to treat, stabilize and deliver life-saving treatments on the way to the hospital. Use your best judgment when deciding to call an ambulance, but err on the side of caution. Call an ambulance under the following circumstances:

- Severe shortness of breath or inability to breathe
- Symptoms of a heart attack (chest pain, pain in arms, shortness of breath, sweating, fatigue)
- Symptoms of a stroke (sudden weakness or numbness in face, arm, or leg on one side of the body; abrupt loss of vision; loss of balance, possibly accompanied by vomiting, nausea or trouble swallowing)
- Life-threatening accidents/injuries
- Any traumatic injury that prevents you from moving on your own
- Overdoses

Sondereker also recommends going to the ER rather than urgent care if you have any underlying medical conditions that could complicate treatment, such as diabetes or chronic heart disease.

**WHAT ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH CRISES?**  
Contemplating suicide, self-harm or harming others is a serious medical emergency and needs to be treated as such. It’s important to call 911 or go to the emergency room immediately if you or someone you know is experiencing a mental health crisis. “Just as you would with a physical crisis, you need to find the nearest place of safety and care for a mental health crisis,” Sondereker said.

## WHEN SHOULD I GO TO URGENT CARE?

If you need medical attention but your normal doctor’s office is closed or unable to see you immediately, urgent care can be a good solution. Here are common and appropriate reasons to go to urgent care:

- Flu, cold and/or fevers
- Sore throat
- Mild allergic reactions
- Stomach pain, vomiting and/or diarrhea
- Minor injuries such as simple lacerations or burns
- Sprains
- Urinary tract infections
- Ear infections
- Back pain

## WHEN SHOULD I GO TO THE EMERGENCY ROOM?

If you are experiencing a true emergency, go straight to the ER. These are common reasons to go:

- Breathing and airway difficulties, shortness of breath
- Chest pain
- Sudden weakness or paralysis on one side of the body, severe headache and/or slurred speech (symptoms of stroke)
- Loss of consciousness and/or altered consciousness
- Very high fevers, fevers with a rash or fevers in infants
- Severe burns or deep lacerations with uncontrollable bleeding
- Very severe and sudden pain anywhere in the chest, abdomen or head
- Head or eye injuries
- Seizures
- Overdoses



\*Message & data rates may apply. For more information, visit [texterhelp.com](http://texterhelp.com) or [DownInVegas.com](http://DownInVegas.com)