



Improving equitable access: Finding better options than the emergency room



When Elena started to suffer from a fever and a cough, she wasn't sure what to do.

She didn't have a primary care physician to call, and she wasn't sure where the nearest urgent care was. She was worried that her symptoms might be signs of pneumonia. She knew she couldn't afford to take time off work if her symptoms worsened.

The hospital was a short distance from her work, so she walked over to the emergency department (ED) when her shift ended. It was busy, and she learned she'd have to wait several hours before a doctor could see her. Not knowing what else to do, she settled in for the long wait.

Was this the best option for Elena? What if she had the resources to find the right care for her needs — more quickly, with less stress and at a lower cost?

Why right-sized care matters

The emergency room might seem like the best option when a health issue arises. But it really should be reserved for genuine emergencies for the following reasons.

1. ED visits result in much higher costs.

The average cost of care for treating common conditions is much higher in an ED than care in an urgent clinic or physician office.¹ Some estimates say the difference in cost is as much as 10–12 times higher. Even those with insurance coverage end up paying a much higher copay than they would at a primary or urgent care clinic.

A UnitedHealth Group study² investigated the cost of non-emergency visits to the ED. The research showed an average cost of more than \$2,000 for treating a common condition like a cough, sore throat or low back pain in the ED. That amount is much higher than the average \$167 it costs to receive treatment for the same conditions at a physician's office.

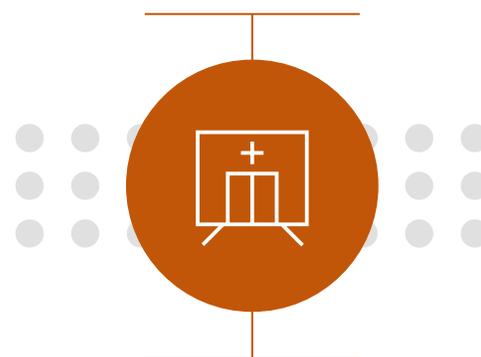
2. ED visits can take much more time than a primary or urgent care visit.

Some people choose to go to the emergency room out of a desire to be seen quickly. Yet wait times can be significantly longer at the ED than at an urgent care clinic. According to the CDC and Kaiser Family Foundation, average ED wait times in many states are longer than two hours for an inpatient room.³ Urgent care clinics can often see patients within 15 to 30 minutes.

Some research shows racial disparities in ED wait times. For example, a study in the *American Journal of Emergency Medicine*⁴ found Black ED patients in need of urgent care were more likely than white patients to be seen promptly. But when they did wait, they waited 13% longer. Researchers say more studies are needed to explore the causes and possible consequences of any disparities.



**ED cost:
10–12x higher**



**ED wait time:
2 hours**



Choosing an ED may signal lack of access to care

While ED visits dropped during the COVID-19 pandemic, the numbers had been increasing. A 2017 study by researchers at the University of Maryland School of Medicine found ED visits increased by 44% between 1996 and 2010.⁵

Certain groups accounted for the most significant growth in emergency room use: African Americans, Medicare and Medicaid beneficiaries, residents of the South and West, and women.

The researchers said that these findings point to increasing ED use by vulnerable populations, reinforcing that socioeconomic and racial inequality hinder access to health care.

In a 2016 study in *Patient Experience Journal*,⁶ researchers conducted interviews with patients and providers to identify reasons for non-emergency ED use. They found that some patients grew up using the ED as a main source of care and weren't aware of other care options. Or they had concerns that their condition was too serious for a primary care visit.

The researchers found that helping patient learn about different types of health service venues might change patterns in ED visits.

Help understanding care choices

That's why Optum has implemented Personal Health Support as a resource for our members.

With a quick call to the phone number on a member's health plan ID card, members can get help finding the best care option for their situation. This includes emergency room decision support.

We're not sitting back and waiting for patients to reach out to us. We've also committed to connecting with those members who are frequent visitors to the ED, offering them educational information and resources. We explain all care options available, provide guidance on costs, and share examples of the kinds of conditions that each care venue is best suited to support.

Options	For help with...	Average cost*
Virtual visits: Anywhere, anytime online doctor visit	 Cold, flu, fever, pinkeye, sinus problems	
Convenience care clinic: Treatment that's nearby	 Skin rash, flu shot, minor injuries, earache	
Urgent care center: Quick, after hours care	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low back pain • Respiratory illnesses (<i>cough, pneumonia, asthma</i>) • Stomach illnesses (<i>pain, vomiting, diarrhea</i>) • Infections (<i>skin, eye, ear/nose/throat, genital-urinary</i>) • Minor injuries (<i>burns, stitches, sprains, small fractures</i>) 	
Emergency room: Care for serious needs	 Chest pain, shortness of breath, severe asthma attack, major burns, severe injuries, kidney stones	

We offer this information in multiple languages to ensure that English proficiency is not a barrier to care.

Regular primary care improves outcomes, drives equity

We're also doing all we can to connect people with primary care providers who can help manage conditions that could lead to expensive and time-consuming visits to the emergency room.

A primary care provider is often a doctor, nurse practitioner or physician's assistant. They might be known as a family medicine doctor, pediatrician or an internist. A trusting relationship with a primary care provider is linked to better health outcomes and experiences.⁷

Finding a primary care provider is also a question of equitable access. It might not feel easy to find a good fit, depending on:

- Where you live
- Your health insurance plan
- Cultural background
- Gender identity
- Language proficiency
- And other factors

If you're an Optum member and want to find a primary care provider or urgent care clinic near you, reach out to our Personal Health Support team today.

Sources:

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