

When 'doc in the box' is fine for a family

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CHICAGO — When his 2½-year-old daughter tripped at day care and cut her chin recently, Lance Moore didn't take her to the emergency room at the nearest hospital. Instead he rushed her to an urgent care center.

"I wanted her to get immediate attention," said Moore, who had been to the St. Charles center before and knew the doctor who gave his daughter five stitches. "He offered to call a plastic surgeon, although he said he didn't think that was necessary, said Moore, who lives in Carol Stream, Ill. "He did a real nice job."

Urgent care centers have been

gaining ground across the country recently as an attractive medical option for time-pressed families trying to avoid spending hours in a hospital ER or days waiting for a doctor's appointment.

Sometimes known as "docs in a box," the centers offer walk-in medical services and extended hours to customers with sore throats, ear infections, sprained or fractured limbs, simple wounds and other non-life-threatening medical problems. Doctors provide the care, assisted by nurses, and generally X-ray and laboratory services are available. Most centers are open 365 days a year, and insurance policies cover most services.

This convenience-oriented format,

started more than 20 years ago, is getting a boost as hospitals and private firms build new centers, responding in part to new competition from retail clinics in Walgreens, CVS and Wal-Mart stores.

For patients, the centers offer easy access and affordable care, charging a fraction of what services would cost in an emergency room. Many insurers, keen to keep costs down, have started encouraging people to use urgent care as an alternative to ERs in the evenings or weekends when their doctors offices are closed.

That puts the onus on patients to evaluate their symptoms and recognize what level of care they need, said Sandra Schneider, an emergency-

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HEALTH TODAY

Old softy. Consuming a half-teaspoon of heart-healthy flaxseed oil every day may soothe irritated skin. In a 12-week study of 45 women, those taking flaxseed oil supplements daily saw a 45 percent reduction in redness and 25 percent less water loss, resulting in smoother, softer skin.

Source: Prevention magazine, June issue

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department physician at the University of Rochester Medical Center in New York and a vice president of the American College of Emergency Physicians.

Generally, urgent care is for common medical conditions only. Symptoms that warrant a visit to the ER include difficulty breathing, fainting, sudden dizziness, changes in mental status, severe or persistent vomiting or diarrhea, uncontrolled bleeding, changes in vision, and pain or pressure in the chest or upper abdomen, according to materials on the topic prepared by Edward Hospital.

In most states, urgent care centers are not overseen by the

department of health or other state agencies. Some centers have sought out accreditation, a mark of professional approval, but many haven't. Patients would be well advised to check out in advance the scope of a center's services, the credentials of its staff and the hours of operation, Schneider recommended.

For families with young children, parents should call and find out if a center offers pediatric care and, if so, whether they treat babies and infants, said Lou Ellen Horwitz, executive director of the Urgent Care Association of America. The association is currently drafting a list of criteria that will let consumers know what to expect from an urgent care center and taking steps to improve professional training for

staff.

In a comprehensive 2008 survey, it counted 8,000 urgent care centers across the country. The vast majority are owned by physicians; about 15 percent are associated with hospitals. Although 1 in 4 centers serve an urban population, the majority — 55 percent — are in the suburbs, where affluent and privately insured patients often are reluctant to spend hours waiting to be seen in an ER.

The survey found that about 60 percent of patients at urgent care centers are seen by a doctor, nurse practitioner or physician assistant in 30 minutes or less, another 25 percent are seen in 30 to 45 minutes, and 15 percent spend 45 minutes or longer.

For some consumers, urgent care centers are usurping primary care physicians — a

trend some medical experts view with alarm. Pina Lobraco, a mother of two young girls who lives in Addison, Ill., said she finds it easier to pop into a nearby Alexian immediate care center than to call her doctor and wait to get an appointment.

On Mothers Day, Lobraco was at the center with Daniella, 4, who'd started crying and holding her ear earlier in the day. "I don't know why it is, but a lot of times it seems (the girls) get sick in the evening or early in the morning or on the weekends," she said.

"My regular doctor doesn't know who I am," Lobraco said later in an interview. "But these people (at the center) know me — they see me all the time."