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EDITOR'S PICK FEATURED

MEDICAL CHOICES IMPACT FINANCIAL WELL-BEING

Save money by saving the hospital ER for 'true emergencies'

By CATHY DYSON THE FREE LANCE-STAR Jul 29, 2017



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What's a person to do when he needs to see a doctor whom he knows and trusts, but that doctor isn't

available for weeks?

A member of my family recently faced that dilemma. When he realized he wouldn't be able to get into his doctor's office immediately, he asked the receptionist what he should do if his pain worsened.

Visit the emergency room?

No, came the response. That's too expensive, but you might consider an urgent care facility.

The family member decided to wait it out, but not after ranting about what's the point of having health insurance if you can't get the care you need when you need it.

He had tried making an appointment with his primary care physician, who couldn't see him for a week, then a specialist, who wasn't available for five weeks. He figured his primary doctor would refer him to a specialist anyway, so he settled on a fellow doctor in the specialist's practice who had a open slot in two weeks.

My family member opted against an urgent care facility, not because of its nickname as a "doc in the box," but because he didn't want to see someone he doesn't know. And, he would rather be examined by a doctor well-versed in a specialty rather than a professional who might see dozens of different ailments in a day.

My family member's scenario came to mind this week, along with an interesting graphic about hospital and office visits.

The graphic pointed out how much money could have been saved if patients had gone to a doctor's office, like the one my family member was trying to get into, rather than a hospital emergency room.

The data came from Virginia Health Information and included "avoidable visits." They're so named because patients could have avoided the more expensive visit to the emergency room by seeing a primary care physician instead.

The five most common avoidable visits to emergency rooms across Virginia in 2015 were for upper respiratory infections, urinary tract infections, headaches, earaches and back problems.

Had patients scheduled an office visit with their doctor, the treatment would have cost \$10.9 million, the VHI stated.

Because patients went to hospital emergency rooms instead, the total for treatment was \$79 million.

“These visits have a large impact on the cost of health care for all Virginians,” stated the graphic.

The VHI went on to say that 14 percent of the 1.3 million visits to Virginia hospital emergency rooms in 2015 could have been treated at a doctor’s office. Of those 180,890 potentially avoidable emergency-room visits, almost 80 percent were for the infections and various aches listed.

Clearly, none of those ailments are life-threatening conditions, but as my family member came to realize, they certainly make for uncomfortable situations.

‘TRUE EMERGENCIES’

Even though hospital emergency rooms end up treating stomach aches and back problems, they clearly weren’t set up for that.

“They’re really meant for true emergencies,” said Eric Fletcher, senior vice president for strategy, marketing and business development for Mary Washington Healthcare. “We’re all better served if we can make sure that the strep throats and the earaches are served closer to home, in a lower-cost environment.”

But if the pain starts after 5 p.m. or on the weekends and immediate relief is sought, what’s a person to do? A study by the National Center for Health Statistics found that almost half of the people who visited a hospital emergency room, but weren’t admitted, did so because their doctor’s office wasn’t open.

Another option is urgent care clinics. There are 19 such facilities within a 20-mile drive of Fredericksburg, and as in other communities nationwide, they “help fill a vital gap when you become sick or injured, but your regular doctor is not available and you can’t wait for an appointment,” according to a March 2016 story by Scripps Health Media.

The average urgent care visit costs patients \$71 to \$125 for basic care, with additional costs added for shots, X-rays and labs. That’s compared to the average emergency room visit, which costs \$1,318, according to the Urgent Care Locations website.

WHO YA GONNA CALL?

When should you make an appointment with your doctor, visit an urgent care clinic or head straight to the emergency room? As always, decisions depend on an individual’s situation, but here are some

general guidelines culled from several sources.

A 2016 article in Forbes magazine suggested that patients can get similar treatment for minor problems such as sore throat or poison ivy if they go to their doctor or an urgent care clinic. Determining factors may be when the problems occur or how difficult it is to make an appointment with your regular doctor.

The Forbes story also stated that walk-in clinics may be OK for people who are relatively healthy, except for whatever minor issue they're having. If clinicians recommend a specialist, patients should check with their regular doctor.

For chronic conditions such as high blood pressure or diabetes, it's recommended that patients see their own doctor, someone who knows their family history and has monitored the treatment over time.

"A provider who knows your health history, your habits and your personality can more easily recognize signs that indicate a potential change in your health," states the One Medical Group website.

But no matter what the time of day or night, there are some conditions that demand an immediate visit to the hospital emergency room.

They include: chest pain, difficulty breathing or speaking, severe abdominal pain, high fevers in babies, broken bones, bleeding, head injuries or seizures.

That's any condition that could cause loss of life, limb or eyesight.

We're all better served if we can make sure that the strep throats and the earaches are served closer to home, in a lower-cost environment. —Eric Fletcher, Mary Washington Healthcare

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