

PRIMARY CARE INVESTMENT: EVIDENCE SNAPSHOT

Urgent Care Centers

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Background

Urgent care centers provide on-demand medical care outside of traditional primary care office hours while also avoiding costly emergency department (ED) visits.¹ There are more than 9,000 urgent care centers in the United States, typically staffed by qualified physicians, physician assistants, and nurse practitioners.² They provide timely treatment for a variety of minor injuries and illnesses, and often include access to ancillary services such as laboratory and xray.³ Such centers are usually open on weekends and evenings for walk-in care, and offer a more affordable option for patients relative to the ED.^{2,4} Urgent care centers are increasingly owned by hospital systems seeking to expand their referral base, about a third are owned by physicians or physician groups, and some are independently owned.² These facilities serve as a middle-ground between EDs and primary care practices, providing low cost and rapid service for episodic medical needs.²

Quality Implications

There are mixed results on how growth of urgent care centers affects ED visits.

- A study of children enrolled in Medicaid found patients who used urgent care centers had lower rates of return to either urgent care or ED settings within seven days compared to the rate of return following ED use (6.9% vs. 8.4%).⁵
- A retrospective study of ED utilization at four New York City Hospitals and several urgent care centers and retail clinics in proximity to those hospitals found that despite the rapid expansion of urgent care centers between 2010 and 2015, there was no impact on utilization of hospital EDs. Researchers posited that urgent care centers are filling a provider shortage and addressing patient demand for convenience.¹

Concerns exist about the impact of urgent care centers on health care quality.

- Urgent care centers have the highest rates of unnecessary and inappropriate antibiotic prescribing, compared to EDs, retail clinics, and medical office visits.⁶
- A systematic review of studies from 2004 to 2014 examined why patients sought care at urgent care centers and whether urgent care centers disrupted continuity of primary care. The authors cite common reasons for use of urgent care centers: barriers to convenient and timely access to primary care, deflections from the primary care office, patient preference, and a lack of patient understanding about the urgency of their care needs. Coordination between urgent care centers and primary care is rare. These findings suggest that while urgent care centers may increase timely access to certain types of care, they may also disrupt continuity of care for both preventive care and the management of chronic conditions.⁷

- In contrast, findings from a qualitative study suggest that urgent care providers believe they do not disrupt care continuity since most of the care provided is related to acute needs that can be addressed outside of coordinated care plans.²

Cost Implications

When used in place of EDs, urgent care centers have the potential to reduce individual and health care system costs.

- A national study estimated that between 14 and 27 percent of all ED visits could safely take place at urgent care centers or retail clinics, saving approximately \$4.4 billion per year due to the less costly site of care.³
- A comparison of 10 states found that the median Medicaid payments for urgent care center visits were significantly lower than ED visits (\$77 vs. \$186) for similar conditions among low acuity patients. Researchers estimated if all low severity visits (e.g., fevers, ear infections, upper respiratory infections) were seen in urgent care centers instead of EDs, national Medicaid savings could exceed \$50 million annually.⁵
- In 2015, the average price per visit for Texas urgent care centers was \$168, compared to \$2,259 for hospital-based emergency departments. Similarly, out-of-pocket costs for patients visiting the ED with the same diagnoses cost almost 10 times more than those treated in urgent care centers.⁸

Urgent care centers have higher costs relative to primary care visits.

- A review of national claims data for patients using urgent care centers found that the median cost for an urgent care visit was 1.36 times more expensive than the median cost for a primary care visit for similar services and conditions.⁹

References

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