



Docs on Call

Michele Lentz was worried. It was Thursday morning and her 13-year-old daughter, Amelia, had a severe sore throat. Michele thought it might be strep so she called her pediatrician's office. They were completely booked. Worse yet, Amelia had a big middle school dance on Friday night that she would be crushed to miss.

"I didn't know what to do," says Michele, who lives in Severna Park, Maryland. Then a friend suggested she go to an urgent care center. There, the nurse practitioner ran a strep test. The result? Negative. "It was such a relief to know that she didn't have an infection. You just don't want something awful to happen before a big event."

In the past 20 years, urgent care centers—or walk-in clinics—have been filling a need for patients who have

conditions that require prompt attention but do not pose a serious health threat. "A large percentage of people use emergency rooms after hours for sore throats, colds, or coughs, or if they can't get in to see their family doctor. You can end up waiting for hours," says Dr. Bill Meadows, president of The Urgent Care Association of America.

These centers typically have a doctor, nurse, and a physician's assistant on staff. Many are open 24 hours a day. Urgent care centers can be especially helpful when you are traveling and when you've moved into a new area and don't have a family doctor. If you do have a doctor, records of your visit are sent to her office.

When it comes to insurance, going to an urgent care center rather than an emergency room may save you a bundle. Many plans have much higher co-pays for ER visits than for urgent care clinics. This means you and your wallet will be healthier.

After Michele Lentz learned Amelia didn't have strep throat, she treated the virus with

some chicken soup and TLC. By Friday, Amelia was ready to go to the big dance. "She ended up feeling fine and having a ball."

CHRISTLE FIEDLER

TO FIND AN URGENT CARE CLINIC NEAR YOU

- Visit findurgentcare.com (Note: This isn't a complete listing of all clinics in the country.)
- Check the Yellow Pages under physicians or medical clinics.
- Call the information number of your insurance provider for a list of covered urgent care clinics.
- Call your family doctor, pharmacist, or local emergency room.

KIT STARTS WITH 'K' Barbara k!, the company that helps women learn to install shelves and replace showerheads, now comes to the rescue on the highway. The new barbara k! Roadside Safety Kit (\$39.99 from barbarak.com) has all the basics you're likely to need in a roadside emergency, including jumper cables, gloves, a waterproof poncho, and a flashlight that doubles as a lantern. An additional \$10 buys membership in a roadside assistance plan that offers lockout assistance, jump-starts, tire changes, fuel delivery, and accident towing. 🚗