


Urgent vs Emergency Care

Quick Reference Guide

 [Medical Services](#)

 [Health Promotion
Appointment](#)

Help! Where can I go to get quick medical attention?

What's the difference between my PCP, Urgent Care, and the Emergency Room?

How do I know what type of care I need?

If I'm going to a new medical provider, how will they know my medical history?

What happens when I go to an urgent care clinic?

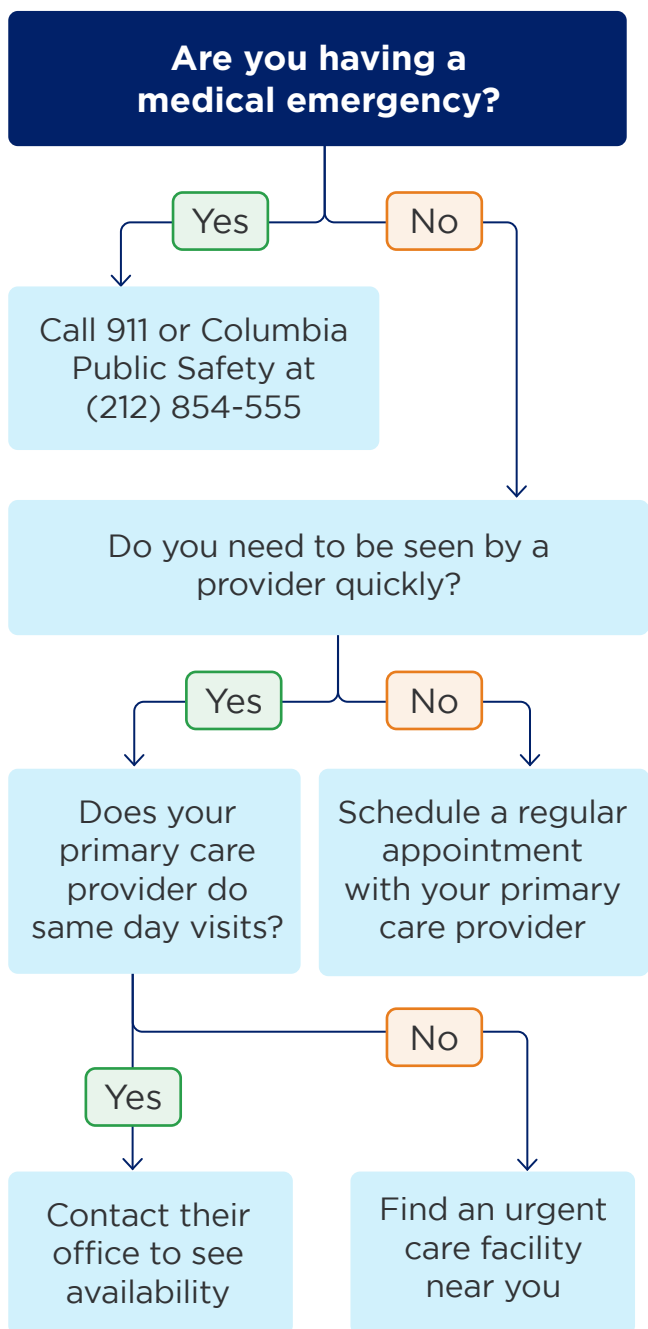
Can I use my insurance at an urgent care clinic?

How do I use Columbia University Emergency Medical Services (CUEMS)?

What happens when I go to the ER?

How does insurance work with an ER visit?

Help! Where can I go to get quick medical attention?



Not sure what to do?

Call TSL for support (212) 854-7426

If you're having a medical emergency:

On-campus: Contact Public Safety at (212) 854-5555 to access Columbia University Emergency Medical Services (CUEMS).

Note: CUEMS covers from 105th to 128th Street in Morningside and Manhattanville

Off-campus:

Contact 911 to access emergency medical services as soon as possible.

Note: Ambulances only go to hospitals, not primary care providers or urgent care.

You can find detailed information on the [Emergency page](#) of the Columbia Health website.

If you need an urgent appointment with a medical provider:

If you're on the Columbia Student Health Insurance Plan with Aetna or are a student who has paid the full-time health and related fee: Schedule an appointment with Columbia Health's Medical Services through the patient portal or by calling (212) 854-7426 and requesting a same day appointment.

If you haven't paid the full-time health services fee: Go to an off-campus urgent care center or schedule a virtual urgent care appointment.

If you're not sure what to do or where to go: Call Columbia Health Medical Services at (212) 854-7426. Request to go into the **Telephone Symptom Line (TSL)** to speak to a triage nurse. This number is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for all students. The nurse will listen to your concerns and help you determine the next steps. After hours, press 4 during the automated message to speak to the on-call provider

What's the difference between my PCP, Urgent Care, and the Emergency Room?

The biggest differences between your primary care provider, urgent care, and the emergency room are:

1. The severity of the health concern
2. How quickly you need to receive support



Emergency room (ER)

This is for situations that require **immediate assessment by a medical provider**. A team of medical professionals will examine you to determine how severe your concern is and the type of support you need. You might go to an ER for concerns like:

- Chest pain or pressure
- Shortness of breath/hard to breathe
- Seizures
- Fever over 104° F
- Compound fracture (where your bone pokes through your skin)
- Head injuries, confusion, disorientation
- Severe abdominal pain
- Sudden, severe headache, paralysis, or weakness
- Severe mental health concerns
- Uncontrollable bleeding



Urgent Care

A medical professional who provides care on the same day. You'll see the provider who is available on that shift, rather than choosing a specific one. They provide **quick support for concerns like a cold, flu, cuts, scrapes, or sprains**.



Primary Care Provider (PCP)

Your go-to medical professional. This includes **routine visits, general health and medical questions**, and referrals to other providers. They may offer same day or urgent appointments. However, most appointments require advanced scheduling.

How do I know what type of care I need?

This depends on how severe your medical concerns are.

Whenever possible, visit your PCP for a health concern. They have your full medical history, which can help them provide the best care possible.

Visiting your PCP isn't always an option, and at times, there may be other factors that affect your decision of which provider to see. Some of these include:

- > How far you live from your PCP or urgent care
- > Provider availability
- > Telehealth service options

For example, if your PCP doesn't have any same day appointments available, you may want to go to urgent care to be seen that same day. If you're really not feeling well, you may prefer to go to the closer location or do a telehealth appointment.

If your healthcare provider has additional concerns, they may refer you to another type of care. For example, if your health problem is something that Medical Services isn't equipped to fully assess or treat, you may be referred to the Mount Sinai Morningside Emergency Room for care.

Serious medical concerns



Go to the emergency room!



Urgent concerns



- Same day appointment with PCP
- Urgent care



Routine health concerns



Appointment with your PCP



Columbia Health has a 24/7 line for urgent medical concerns for students to speak with an on-call provider.

Call **212-854-7426** to get started:

- > During business hours, tell the person on the phone you wish to speak to the on-call triage nurse.
- > After business hours, press four (4) on the phone tree to speak to the on-call provider.

You may have to wait for a few minutes or get a call back if the provider is speaking to someone else.

If you don't feel well and need to travel to get to a healthcare provider, consider options to keep others safe. These can include wearing a mask, coughing or sneezing into your arm or clothing, or notifying the provider before your visit if you have symptoms.

If I'm going to a new medical provider, how will they know my medical history?

They might not!

If you're going to an urgent care or an emergency room, you'll likely be meeting with a healthcare provider who has no connection to your PCP. You'll likely have to fill out forms to tell them about your medical history including:



Any current medicine you take, including prescriptions and over-the-counter.



Any allergies or ongoing medical concerns you have, like chronic health conditions.



Family history of medical conditions like heart problems, seizures, or stroke.

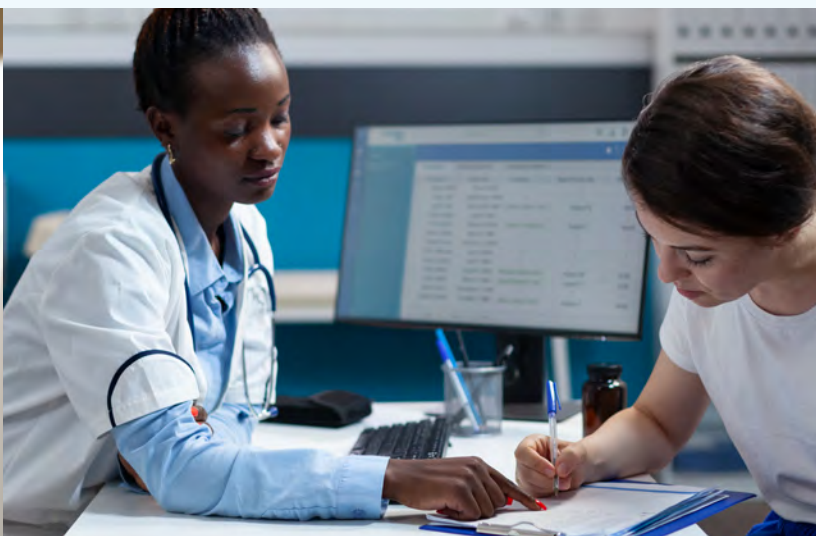


Any substances you've consumed recently, including alcohol, marijuana, or other drugs.

This helps your medical team consider potential reactions from medicine they might give you or help explain what you're feeling. They aren't trying to get you in trouble and will keep this information confidential.



For more information about how your privacy as a patient is protected or giving healthcare providers your health history, see the [Medical Records guide](#).

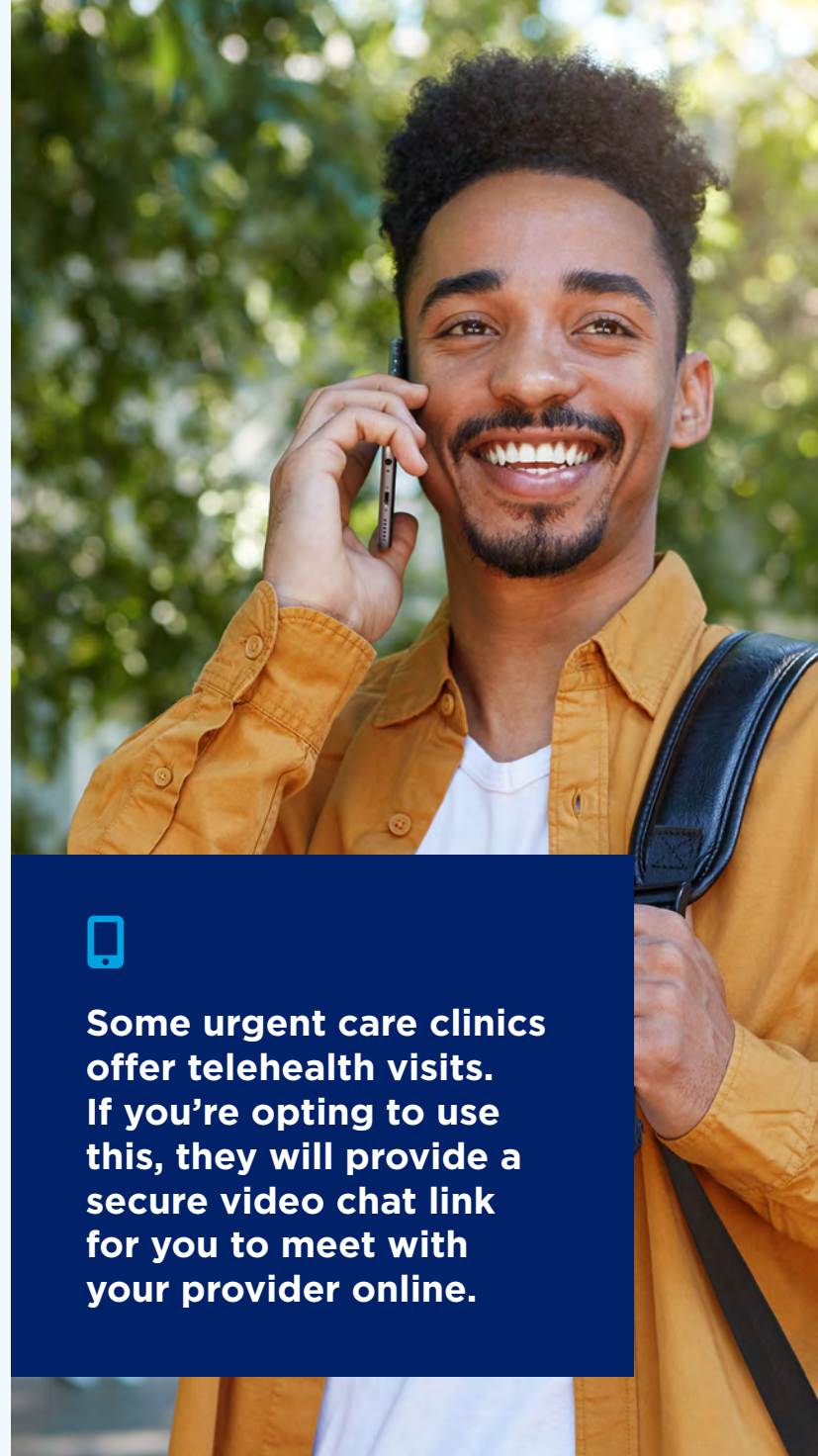


What happens when I go to an urgent care clinic?

Most urgent care clinics don't require appointments. You can check in when you arrive at the clinic, or if it's available, check in online ahead of time to reduce your wait.

When you're called into the exam room, you may see a physician, a physician assistant, or a nurse practitioner. These providers are all trained to diagnose you and provide treatment. They will ask you about your concerns, take vitals (such as blood pressure, temperature, and pulse), and do additional exams specific to your concerns. Some examples include:

- > If you have a cold or other illness, they may check your ears, nose, or throat or may palpate (or press on your stomach) to look for signs of swelling or infection.
- > If you have a sprain or other pain, they may touch the affected area and do various tests.
- > The provider may do only a physical exam or they may order lab testing including swabs, blood work, or urine tests.



Some urgent care clinics offer telehealth visits. If you're opting to use this, they will provide a secure video chat link for you to meet with your provider online.



Whether you're seeing a provider in person or online, based on your concern, they may recommend that you see your PCP for follow-up care.

Can I use my insurance at an urgent care clinic?

Navigating insurance when you have an urgent medical need can be confusing and stressful.



Most insurance plans provide coverage for urgent care.

However, you'll want to check with your insurance company to see which clinics are in-network. You might consider bookmarking a nearby urgent care facility in your phone that accepts your insurance for reference if you need it. Going to a clinic out-of-network can be expensive, especially if you need additional testing or treatment.



The Columbia University Student Health Insurance Plan provides coverage for urgent care visits.

For more details about what urgent care clinics are covered, visit the [Aetna member website](#). For questions about billing, call the number listed on your insurance card or contact the on-campus [health insurance office](#) for support.





How do I use **Columbia University Emergency Medical Services (CUEMS)?**

Call (212) 854-5555 to get connected to CUEMS.

They are staffed by student volunteer emergency medical technicians (EMTs) who can provide basic life support and transport you to the hospital.

All volunteers are certified and provide the same type of care that you'd receive if you called 911 and rode in a public or private ambulance. They're also confidential providers covered under HIPAA and FERPA. They're held to the same privacy requirements as medical providers.

Once dispatched by Public Safety, the CUEMS team will come to assess the situation. Depending on the concerns, they may recommend that you be transported to the hospital or provide guidance for you to manage the condition.

If you're transported to a hospital by CUEMS EMTs, you won't be charged for the ride to the hospital.

If the hospital must provide treatment (such as medications, wound care, or other support), your insurance will be billed. You'll also be billed for any care provided in the emergency room. CUEMS can only take you to a hospital with an emergency room—they can't transport you to an urgent care facility, your primary care provider's office, or your home.

For more information about CUEMS, including hours of operations, visit the [CUEMS website](#) or visit their page on [Public Safety's website](#).

What happens when I go to the ER?

Each person's experience when they go to the ER will be different, but there are a few common things to expect.

1. The people with the most severe conditions get treated first.

When you arrive in the emergency room, the healthcare providers will assess patients based on what brought them there. Providers will provide treatment based on the severity of their concerns. This process is called "triage." Emergency room providers treat those who are more severe sooner than someone who is less severe.

2. Be ready to answer many questions and take tests.

Once you're seen, providers will collect any information they can and use a variety of tests to determine what type of treatment you may need. Upon completing the assessments, any needed tests, or imminent care, they will determine your next steps. They may send some people home with instructions



How does insurance work with an ER visit?



In most cases, insurance companies are required to cover emergency room visits, even at out-of-network hospitals.

Many emergency rooms require a copay, and on some plans, that copay is waived if you're admitted to the hospital. If you're at an in-network hospital, you may be billed for the care provided in the emergency room according to the cost structure outlined by your plan. If you're at an out-of-network facility, your plan may not cover all testing and treatment, and you'll be responsible for covering those additional costs



The Columbia University Student Health Insurance Plan covers emergency room visits.

The [Aetna member website](#) provides additional information about the costs of being transported to the ER and receiving care.

For questions about billing, call the number listed on the back of your insurance card, or contact the on-campus [health insurance office](#) for support.



[Back to Top](#)

