

ATTENTION, SHOPPERS! Health Exam in Aisle 2

Express medical clinics are now in stores across the country. Can they actually give you the same quality care as your own doc? FITNESS investigates.

BY RACHEL BERTSCHE

POP QUIZ: If you're suffering from a nasty case of springtime allergies, which is the quickest route to feeling better, making an appointment with your doctor or visiting your local pharmacy? Turns out, it's likely the latter.



Only 47 percent of sick patients in the U.S. can get a same- or next-day appointment with a physician, according to a 2005 survey. Meanwhile, it can take just 30 minutes to see a medical professional—and fill a prescription—at a new type of health center springing up in big-box retail stores and pharmacies.

By the end of 2008, there will be at least 1,500 retail health clinics nationwide, up a whopping 700 percent from 2006, reports the industry trade group Convenient Care Association. These clinics treat 35 to 40 of the most common nonchronic ailments, including allergies, flu, strep throat and urinary-tract and ear infections. They're open seven days a week (no appointment needed) and cost \$49 to \$70 a visit (most accept some type of insurance). Typically, the clinics are overseen by doctors and run by nurse practitioners (registered nurses with a master's or doctoral degree).

"Many women visit these clinics because their health-care provider can't see them right away and they want convenience," says Sandra Ryan, R.N., chief nurse practitioner officer of Take Care Health Systems, one of the country's largest managers of retail health clinics. Indeed, 56 percent of people choose

RETAIL HEALTH CLINICS ARE GETTING A THUMBS-UP FROM CONSUMERS: 90 PERCENT SAY THEY'RE SATISFIED WITH THEIR CARE.

retail clinics because of convenient hours, finds a 2007 survey by Forrester Research, Inc. (Forty-eight percent go because of the location; 28 percent say they're tired of long waits to see their own doctor.) In addition, clinics may help keep less-than-urgent matters out of the ER, speeding up care for true emergencies. Forty percent of patients who visit clinics say they would other-

wise have gone to the emergency room, finds a recent survey. "Getting quick treatment for a simple problem can often catch a condition before it escalates," says Lori Mosca, M.D., director of preventive cardiology at New York-Presbyterian Hospital and a FITNESS advisory board member.

But all retail health clinics aren't created equal, says Jim King, M.D., president of the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP). Although industry-wide standards are in the works, as of yet, none are in place. Another concern: These clinics simply cannot provide the same standard of treatment as a primary-care physician. "They're not set up to handle long-term care," says Dr. Mosca. And clinics do not have immediate access to complete medical records. "Most of my patients have several things going on at once," says Peter Eupierre, M.D., a physician in

YOUR SMART-CARE CHECKLIST

Wherever you get medical treatment, you should feel comfortable with the level of cleanliness and privacy provided. In addition, the AAFP and the American Medical Association agree that all retail health clinics should have:

- ✓ A well-defined list of the medical issues they are capable of treating and how much each treatment costs.
- ✓ A supervising local physician whose responsibilities include being on call during clinic hours, doing chart reviews and attending staff meetings.
- ✓ A referral network of local doctors, in case your illness is out of the clinic's range.
- ✓ Electronic health records of patient info, which can be shared with a family physician, with your permission.

private practice in Melrose Park, Illinois. "If they have diabetes and a cough, I can't prescribe cough syrup that might raise blood sugar. I need to have all that info in front of me. Will these clinics be able to do that? Every patient needs her own primary-care physician who has a record of past problems, so he can spot patterns or recurring issues." Dr. Mosca agrees, adding, "It's also important for people with symptoms that aren't improving to see their own doctor. And if you have a chronic medical problem, such as high blood pressure, visit your primary doctor on a regular basis."

Bottom line: Retail health clinics, when used wisely by patients in need of short-term care, are getting the thumbs-up from consumers. Ninety percent of people who used one were satisfied with the quality of care they received, according to a 2007 Harris Interactive survey. What's next—a dentist in Aisle 5? ■

Inside a Retail Health Clinic

We asked three women to visit their local clinic, where each gave her medical history, got her vitals taken and had a consultation. Here's what they found.

DR WALK-IN MEDICAL CARE
Duane Reade, New York City

REASON FOR VISIT Flu shot

WAIT TIME/COST 15 minutes; \$30

ATMOSPHERE "A clean, private room, like a smaller version of a doctor's office. It didn't feel like a drugstore in the middle of Times Square!"

QUALITY ASSURANCE Has not signed an agreement with AAFP stating that it will adhere to the organization's quality guidelines.

PATIENT FEEDBACK "I was surprised to be seen by an actual M.D. Even though I was in and out in five minutes, I didn't feel rushed. I'd definitely go back for something like the flu that requires quick diagnosis and medicine, but not to get a prescription written. The clinic doesn't take my insurance, so it would cost \$95. I'd rather wait for an appointment with my doctor."

SMARTCARE FAMILY MEDICAL CENTER
Wal-Mart, Aurora, CO

REASON FOR VISIT Allergy attack

WAIT TIME/COST None; \$65

ATMOSPHERE "Private and professional, and the waiting area was set away from the main store, so it felt like a regular doctor's office."

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PATIENT FEEDBACK "After the nurse practitioner examined me, he took time to listen to my questions and explain his recommendations. He offered me a number of treatments in different price ranges, which I've never experienced before. Apparently, several allergy medications are equally effective for my particular health situation, but some are cheaper than others."

TAKE CARE HEALTH CENTER
Walgreens, Chicago

REASON FOR VISIT Bad cough

WAIT TIME/COST 3 minutes; \$74

ATMOSPHERE "A small space in the back of the store, near the pharmacy. The exam rooms are tiny, and it still feels like you're in the drugstore, not a doctor's office."

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PATIENT FEEDBACK "The nurse practitioner spent a lot of time with me and was clear about wanting to cover her bases. I ended up getting a prescription. Unfortunately, the clinic doesn't have a relationship with my insurance company, so I had to cover the cost myself. But I was worried that I had strep, so, for me, this was a great alternative to waiting two days to see a doctor. I got my money's worth."