Kids' ER Visits Decline If Doctor Has Evening Hours: Study
Availability of later appointments cut trips to emergency room by half, researchers say

FRIDAY, June 21 (HealthDay News) -- Fewer children go to emergency rooms when their primary-care doctors have longer office hours, a new study finds.

Researchers examined data from a national survey of U.S. parents and found that children had half as many emergency-room visits if their primary-care doctor had evening office hours five or more days a week.

Many parents, however, didn't know if their child's primary-care provider had extended office hours, according to the study, which was published online June 7 in the Journal of Pediatrics. The findings also are scheduled for presentation at the AcademyHealth annual research meeting, which will be held June 23 to 25 in Baltimore.

"These findings are an important step in understanding where primary-care practices and medical home programs can be most effective in making changes to enhance access," study lead author Dr. Joe Zickafoose, a University of Michigan pediatrician, said in a university news release.

Zickafoose said primary-care practices nationwide are working on ways to make it easier for families to get advice and make appointments. A key goal of these efforts is to help parents avoid the stress and expense of unnecessary emergency-room visits.

Extending primary-care office hours might be a good way to do this, Zickafoose said.

Other options include 24-hour phone advice; email or patient portal communication; same-day sick visits; and evening and weekend office hours.

Changes intended to improve access can be costly and time consuming for primary-care providers, so information about the most effective ways to achieve this could help them decide where to commit their resources, Zickafoose said.

The study found that changes other than extended office hours were not associated with a reduced number of emergency-room visits.

"We hope that our study encourages parents and primary-care practices to communicate more about when the office is open and when they can call for advice," Zickafoose said.

More information

The American Academy of Pediatrics outlines when parents should call their child's doctor.

-- Robert Preidt

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