

FAMILY LIFE

Is It a Medical Emergency, or Not?

When your child is sick or hurt, it can be difficult to tell whether an urgent care or emergency department is the best choice. In making that decision, it is important to stay calm and recognize the difference between a medical emergency (</English/health-issues/injuries-emergencies/Pages/When-Your-Child-Needs-Emergency-Medical-Services.aspx>) and a medical situation where a different type of care may be more appropriate.



Nonemergency Medical Situations:

As a first step in nonemergency situations, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends calling your pediatrician's office—your child's "medical home"—to discuss your child's needs.

Pediatricians are very accustomed to taking phone calls at all times and can often deal with problems over the phone. *See [Urgent Care: Is It Worth the No Wait?](/English/family-life/health-management/Pages/Nonemergency-Acute-Care-AAP-Policy-Explained.aspx)* (</English/family-life/health-management/Pages/Nonemergency-Acute-Care-AAP-Policy-Explained.aspx>) for more information.

Situations that warrant care for illness or injury, but not emergency care:

Examples of Nonemergency Medical Situations:
Minor burns
Earache or ear infection
Pink eye
Potential urinary tract infection (UTI)
Sore throats and potential strep throat
Rashes and mild skin infections
Gastrointestinal illnesses, such as vomiting and diarrhea with mild dehydration
Simple wounds
Foreign objects in ears and noses
Colds and coughs
Allergies

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Remember, for nonemergency situations, first call your child's pediatrician. If you believe an injury or illness is threatening your child's life or may cause permanent harm, go to the emergency room or call an ambulance. If your child is seriously ill or injured, it is safer for your child to be transported to the emergency department by ambulance.

Emergency Medical Situations:

A trip to the emergency room is the best place for treating severe injuries or life-threatening illnesses. As a rule, if your child can walk, talk, interact, and play, chances are whatever she or he has is not an emergency. *See [10 Things for Parents to Know Before Heading to the ER](/English/health-issues/injuries-emergencies/Pages/10-Things-for-Parents-to-Know-Before-Heading-to-the-ER)* ([/English/health-issues/injuries-emergencies/Pages/10-Things-for-](/English/health-issues/injuries-emergencies/Pages/10-Things-for-Parents-to-Know-Before-Heading-to-the-ER)

Parents-to-Know-Before-Heading-to-the-ER.aspx) for more information.

If your child is experiencing a true medical emergency, you should visit a hospital emergency room or call 911 immediately.

Situations that require emergency medical care:

Examples of Emergency Medical Situations:

Large lacerations/wounds with bleeding that won't stop
Fever of >100.4° F in a child younger than 60 days (2 months) old
Seizure lasting more than 2 minutes in a child with no prior history of a seizure
Any of the following conditions after a head injury: decrease in level of alertness, confusion, headache, vomiting, irritability, difficulty walking
Loss in consciousness
Severe abdominal pain
Severe burns
Swallowed object with difficulty breathing or swallowing
Severe bone fractures
Difficulty breathing or bluish tinge to lips, skin, fingertips, or nail beds
Vomiting or coughing up blood
Severe neck stiffness or rash along with a fever
Poisonings
Eye pain
Croup
Any venomous bites or stings with spreading local redness and swelling, or evidence of general illness
New or worsening psychiatric or behavioral health issue
Worsening of most chronic illnesses such as diabetes, asthma, etc.

* If your child is experiencing a true medical emergency, visit a hospital emergency room or call 911 immediately. If you aren't sure whether it is a true emergency, never hesitate to call your pediatrician's office—even if you know the office is closed.

If you aren't sure whether it is a true emergency, never hesitate to call your pediatrician's office—even if you know the office is closed. Pediatricians are very accustomed to taking phone calls at all times and can often deal with problems over the phone. If your pediatrician is unable to see you but believes your child should be examined, he or she will advise you on the most appropriate place for your child to receive care and how quickly your child should be seen.

Additional Information & Resources:

- [When to Call Emergency Medical Services \(EMS\) \(/English/health-issues/injuries-emergencies/Pages/When-to-Call-Emergency-Medical-Services-EMS.aspx\)](#)
- [First Aid Guide for Parents & Caregivers \(/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/First-Aid-Guide.aspx\)](#)
- [Nonemergency Acute Care: When It's Not the Medical Home \(http://dx.doi.org/10.1542/peds.2017-0629\)](http://dx.doi.org/10.1542/peds.2017-0629) (AAP Policy Statement)
- [Guidelines for Care of Children in the Emergency Department \(http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/content/abstract/peds.2009-1807v1\)](http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/content/abstract/peds.2009-1807v1) (AAP Policy Statement)

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e HONcode standard for trustworthy health (<http://www.healthonnet.org/HONcode/Conduct.html>)

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