

Urgent Care and You



DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
PUGET SOUND HEALTH CARE SYSTEM
American Lake Division, Tacoma, WA 98493
Seattle Division, Seattle, WA 98108

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS: URGENT CARE AT AMERICAN LAKE

1. I THOUGHT URGENT CARE WAS EMERGENCY ROOM CARE?

- The Urgent Care Clinic sees patients who believe their condition is not life threatening or have an illness or injury that requires attention in a doctor's office setting.
- Some patients had been relying on the Urgent Care Clinic to provide care beyond its intended scope of service. Urgent care services are designed for non-life threatening conditions.
- Urgent care has never been intended as a substitute for true emergency room care, nor has it been intended as a substitute for an ongoing relationship with a primary care provider. The same holds true for our CBOC primary care providers, as our network of clinics is not intended as a substitute for true emergency care.
- The change in urgent care hours was made to ensure that no Veteran took the risk of relying on urgent care for a true or potentially life-threatening illness or injury.

2. WHY DID THE AMERICAN LAKE URGENT CARE CLINIC REDUCE ITS HOURS?

- This decision was ultimately made to rectify the misperception among some Veterans that urgent care was an emergency room service. It is not the same.
- The change in hours was made to ensure that our patients receive the right kind of care in the right setting at the right time.
- Effective February 1, 2010, hours for the Urgent Care Clinic at American Lake are Monday through Friday, 8:00am – 6:00pm with no weekend, evening, or holiday hours.
- The VA's Tele-health line may be reached 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at (253) 583-2273.

3. HOW IS URGENT CARE DIFFERENT FROM PRIMARY CARE AT AMERICAN LAKE?

- Many of the Veterans who have relied on urgent care had true primary care needs, though they were not seeing a primary care provider for their health care concerns.
- Patients are encouraged to schedule their primary care appointments Monday through Friday, 8:00am – 4:30pm for their general health care concerns and to discuss any non-emergent health care needs.
- The Primary Care Clinic at American Lake continues to expand to allow patients better reliance on primary care for their routine health care needs rather than utilizing urgent care for this purpose.

4. WHAT CONDITIONS OR PROBLEMS WILL BE TREATED AT THE VA URGENT CARE CLINIC?

- Non-life threatening conditions will be considered on a case-by-case basis. If you are suffering from a non-life threatening condition; call the 24 hour Tele-health phone line at (253) 583-2273.
- If you have a condition that cannot wait 24 hours to see a physician, or is life-threatening, you are urged to call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room for care.

5. WHY DO I NEED TO HAVE AN ASSIGNED PRIMARY CARE PROVIDER?

- It is our goal for all patients to be seen within 14 days of their desired date. The ultimate goal is for all patients is to have same day primary care access.
- Currently 89% of our primary care patients are seen within 14 days; for new primary care patients, this number is 82%.
- VA Puget Sound believes that access to a primary care provider ensures you receive the best care based on your specific health care needs.
- Specific questions about your health care should be directed to your primary care provider. It is our goal to provide the best quality primary and specialty care to our patients residing in the Puget Sound region.
- Primary Care at American Lake will continue to expand to give patients better access for their routine health care needs, rather than utilizing urgent care for this purpose. Veterans are encouraged to have a primary care provider.

6. WHY DID YOU CLOSE THE EMERGENCY ROOM AT AMERICAN LAKE?

- American Lake does not have the required level of acute inpatient support services required to operate a true emergency room on its grounds.
- It is important that our patients, as a matter of safety, understand that there are no emergency services available at our American Lake Division.
- Improved patient safety is at the core of these changes.

7. WHERE SHOULD I GO FOR EMERGENCY CARE?

- We want you to call 911 if you feel you have a life-threatening medical emergency, or go to the nearest emergency room in your community.
- The VA's Telehealth line, (253) 583-2273, operates 24/7 including holidays and provides the same guidance regarding emergency care.
- As a matter of patient safety, it is critical that patients understand that the American Lake Division is focused primarily on residential and outpatient care programs and does not offer emergency care.
- If Veterans choose to drive to the American Lake Division seeking emergency care, they risk losing valuable time, only to have to drive to the nearest emergency room.

8. DOES VA PRE-AUTHORIZE EMERGENCY ROOM CARE IN THE COMMUNITY?

- No. There is confusion in the Veteran community about the idea of “pre-authorization” for care. VA does not “pre-authorize” emergency room care and in fact, coverage for emergency room care is a limited benefit.
- Emergency rooms in the Puget Sound region notify VA when a Veteran presents for care. This ensures that the Veteran's care will be considered for payment, it does not guarantee any type of pre-authorization for payment. This communication also provides guidance on when a patient is stable to be moved back to a VA medical center for follow up, care and treatment.
- This means that there must first be an official determination that the care was emergent in nature and that VA facilities were not feasibly available. These determinations are made after care is delivered, not before care is delivered.
- Emergency room care will be considered by the VA for payment only after a review of medical documentation occurs.

9. WILL I HAVE TO PAY FOR CARE RECEIVED AT A NON-VA EMERGENCY ROOM?

- Emergency room care, according to VA regulations, is a limited benefit. This means that under specific situations, VA will pay for non-VA emergency care. The authority for VA to pay for emergency room care is not-preauthorized in advance.
- All decisions by VA regarding coverage and payment of emergency room care are based on federal law which directs the VA in how it reimburses for emergency room care.
- In 1994, a revision to the law added the “prudent layperson” definition as a standard for evaluating whether the patient has an emergency condition. The Department of Veterans Affairs adopted that standard in November 1999 when the Veterans Millennium Health Care and Benefits Act prescribed the “prudent layperson” standard for evaluating emergent care as one of the criteria for authorization and payment of emergency treatment for non-service connected conditions.
- Under specific situations, VA is authorized to pay for non-VA emergency care. VA has authority to pay the emergency room costs if the visit meets specific administrative eligibility and clinical needs.
- Emergency rooms in the Puget Sound region do notify the VA when a VA patient presents at an emergency room for care. This ensures that the Veteran will be considered for payment; it does not however determine payment as it is not a “pre-authorization.”
- The Fee Services office respectfully works with Veterans regarding this complex process to resolve questions about their benefits and coverage for emergency room care and treatment. This includes whenever possible providing education about emergency care coverage and resolving issues about claims in accordance with VA regulations.
- In cases where a Veteran is hospitalized and when their condition is stable, they may be moved to VA Puget Sound facilities to continue their treatments.
- Veterans who have questions about eligibility for VA services can call our Enrollment Eligibility Call Center at 1 (800) 329-8387, ext. 76542.
- Veterans with specific questions about a bill received from a non-VA provider should call 1 (800) 329-8387, ext. 64545.



VA Puget Sound Health Care System 1-800-329-8387

1660 S. Columbian Way
Seattle, WA 98108-1597
206-762-1010

9600 Veterans Drive
American Lake, WA 98493-5000
253-582-8440

VA CRITERIA FOR PAYING FOR EMERGENT CARE FROM NON-VA PROVIDERS

VA may pay for emergency care from non-VA providers when the following criteria are met:

1. If you are a Veteran with one or more VA rated service-connected disabilities, all of the following criteria must be met:
 - a. Care received at the non-VA facility is determined by VA to be emergent;
 - b. A VA facility was not feasibly available to provide care;
 - c. In general, care received at the non-VA facility is for a VA rated service-connected condition, or for any condition if the Veteran is rated permanently and totally disabled. (There are other eligibility groups that may meet this requirement. A full list is available at www.va.gov);
 - d. A claim is filed within 2 years of the date that care was provided by the non-VA facility.
2. If you are a Veteran with no VA-rated service connected disabilities or are treated for a condition not related to your service connected condition, all of the following criteria must be met:
 - a. Care received at the non-VA facility is determined by VA to be emergent;
 - b. A VA facility was not feasibly available to provide care;
 - c. Veteran is enrolled in the VA health care system;
 - d. Veteran has received treatment in any VA facility within the past 24 months from the date that care was provided by the non-VA facility;
 - e. Veteran is personally liable for the cost of care;
 - f. Veteran has no other insurance to pay for the care (for this purpose Medicare and Medicaid are considered other insurance);
 - g. A claim is filed within 90 days of the date that care was provided by the non-VA facility.



Emergency Care in Non-VA Facilities



At some time in your life, you may need emergency care. This document explains what the VA might be able to do for you if you need emergency care. When it is not possible for you to go to a VA medical center, you should go to the nearest hospital that has an emergency room. If you are in an ambulance, the paramedics will usually take you to the closest emergency room. Here is what you should know...

What is an emergency?

A medical emergency is when you have an injury or illness that is so severe that without immediate treatment, the injury or illness threatens your health or life.

How do I know my situation is an emergency?

Use your best judgment. If you believe your health or life is in danger, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room.

If I believe my life or health is in danger, do I need to call the VA before I call for an ambulance or go into an emergency room?

No. Call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room right away.

Do I need to notify the VA after an ambulance takes me to an emergency room, or when I am treated and released?

Yes. You, your family, friends or hospital staff should contact the nearest VA medical center as soon as possible — preferably within 72 hours, so you are better aware of services the VA may limit payment for. Provide the VA with information about your emergency event and services being provided to you. Ask the VA for guidance on how they will consider reimbursing these emergency charges on your behalf, so you can plan accordingly.

If the doctor then wants to admit me to the hospital, must I obtain advance approval from the VA?

- If the admission is an emergency—NO, although prompt notification of the VA is necessary.
- If the admission is not an emergency—YES.

If a VA bed is available and I can be safely transferred, do I have to move to the VA hospital?

Yes. If you refuse to be transferred, the VA will not pay for any further care.

If I am admitted to the hospital as a result of an emergency, how much will VA pay?

This depends on your VA eligibility. The VA may pay all, some, or none of the charges. Ask your local VA medical center's patient benefits counselor about what is allowed under non-VA emergency care programs:

- For service-connected conditions
- For non-service-connected conditions

Will I have to pay for any part of my emergency care?

It is possible. Sometimes co-pays are required based on your VA enrollment. Sometimes the extent of healthcare services reimbursable by the VA are limited by federal law.

Will VA pay for the ambulance and any possible emergency room charges if I leave the emergency room before being treated by a doctor?

Possibly not. If you leave the emergency room prior to being treated by a physician, the VA may not consider claims for that emergency event. You may be liable for some or all resulting ambulance and emergency room charges, regardless of your Veteran eligibility.

Does my enrollment in the VA Health Care System affect my eligibility for emergency care at VA expense?

Yes. Your local VA medical center's benefits counselor can explain how enrollment (or other special status categories) affect your eligibility.

If I have other insurance (TRICARE, Medicare, Medicaid, Blue Cross, etc.), will it affect whether claims for emergency services will be paid at VA expense?

Yes, it may. Your local VA medical center's benefits counselor can explain how other insurance can affect whether the VA can pay for your non-VA medical claims.

Will VA pay for emergency care if I am in jail?

No. The VA is prohibited, by federal law, from paying for the medical claims of incarcerated veterans (or fugitive felons).

How long do I have to file a claim for reimbursement for emergency medical care?

File your claim with the nearest VA medical center quickly. Time limits of 90-days usually apply. Contact your local VA medical center's patient benefits counselor for more information on the timely filing requirements for non-VA care programs.

Will VA pay for emergency care received outside the United States?

Yes in certain cases. VA will only pay for emergency care outside the US if your emergency is related to a service-connected condition. For more information, contact the VA Health Administration Center at (877) 345-8179 or consult this web site <http://www4.va.gov/hac/forbeneficiaries/fmp/fmp.asp>

Non-VA Emergency Care The right care... At the right time... At the right place...

Know your options ahead of time in case an emergency arises. See your VA Medical Center about your eligibility today!

Your Local Fee Program Office: VA Puget Sound Fee Services
1 (800) 329-8387 or (253) 582-8446 x64545

VA Puget Sound Health Care System
(206) 762-1010 | (253) 582-8440
www.pugetsound.va.gov