

What Older Adults Need to Know about Retail Clinics

Retail clinics are medical clinics based in pharmacies, supermarkets, or “big-box” stores. Since they first opened in the U.S. in 2000, there are more than 1,800 retail clinics nationwide. The number of older people using these clinics is around 15 percent.

The care in retail clinics is usually provided by nurse practitioners or physician assistants. Many retail clinics are open seven days a week, and are open later than traditional medical offices. Most retail clinics accept Medicare, Medicaid, and private insurance. They tend to charge less than traditional healthcare providers.

What can retail clinics do?

Retail clinics treat uncomplicated health problems and give standard vaccinations. The most common problems these clinics treat include:

- Colds and coughs
- Flu symptoms
- Sinus and ear infections
- Strep throat
- Allergies
- Minor burns and sunburns

How good is the care at these retail clinics?

Recent studies suggest that these clinics provide good care, similar to care that healthcare providers offer in traditional office settings, urgent care settings, or emergency rooms. Some retail clinics are approved by leading medical accrediting organizations, and have adopted policies to ensure quality care. One report found that 90 percent of patients who used retail clinics were satisfied with the quality and cost of the care.

Your Primary Care Provider Knows You Best

These clinics can't—and shouldn't—take the place of your primary care provider or any specialists you may be seeing. Older adults tend to have more health problems, and more complex healthcare needs, than younger adults. Retail clinics can be a good resource for minor health problems. But, they should not take the place of your primary care provider. All older adults should have a geriatrician or primary care provider who they know and trust for the majority of their healthcare.

Follow these “do’s” whenever you use a retail clinic for minor problems:

DO

bring a complete list of the medications you’re taking—both prescription and over-the-counter drugs and supplements—and include the doses and why you are taking each medication. This way, the clinic staff can make sure these drugs won’t interact with any new medications they may prescribe.

DO

tell the clinic staff if you have had any allergic reactions or other problems with any medications you’ve taken.

DO

give clinic staff your primary care provider’s name and phone number so they can contact him or her.

DO

get a report from the clinic before you leave that includes your diagnosis and any follow-up instructions.

DO

share that report with your geriatrician or primary care provider as soon as possible.

Do NOT use a retail clinic if:

- You have a new, major symptom—for example, chest pain, or shortness of breath. These symptoms require immediate attention. Call your primary care provider or 911.
- You notice a change in a medical problem that you have had for a long time and that your primary care provider or geriatrician has been treating. In these cases, call your provider.
- You have a cough that has lasted for three or more weeks. This may require special medical attention that retail clinics cannot provide.