

## Waiting Room Refreshment Center: Improving the Patient Experience

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Urgent care centers—with their extended night/weekend hours, high-visibility locations, and walk-in service—are differentiated from other health care delivery channels by the “retail-like” experience they provide. Perhaps more similar to restaurants, hotels, and airlines than hospitals and specialist facilities—urgent care is considered a “volume-driven” business in that once a center’s fixed costs are covered, incremental patient revenue goes straight to the bottom line. This means that urgent care’s long-term success depends on creating satisfied patients who not only want to return to the center themselves, but who will also recommend the center to friends and family. Providing an outstanding patient experience is therefore key to attracting, retaining, and growing your urgent care business.

### Providing an outstanding patient experience begins in the waiting area.

Time spent waiting is without a doubt the most common complaint of urgent care patients. Because a center’s throughput is necessarily limited by the capacity of its medical providers—and because the on-demand nature of a walk-in model (as opposed to scheduled appointments) leads to ebb and flow in patient volume—some patient waiting is inevitable. When patient waits cannot be avoided, the next best option is shorten the patient’s *perception of wait* by:

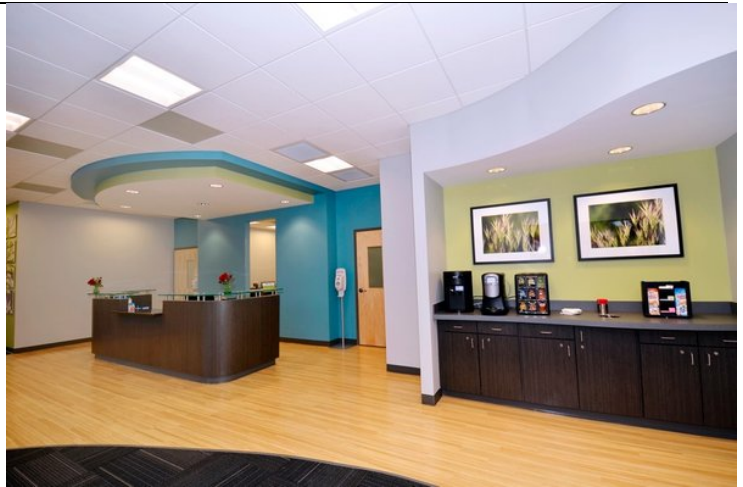
- Frequently communicating anticipated remaining wait times;
- Offering to call or page patients who want to run errands off-site during their waits;
- Providing “distractions” such as Wi-Fi, television, current magazines and children’s play areas; and
- Creating a comfortable and aesthetically pleasing waiting room environment with high-quality finishes, a variety of seating choices including sofas, chairs and game tables, Kleenex dispensers, hand sanitizer, trashcans, easily accessible restrooms, and refreshments. Table 1 provides a couple of examples of well-appointed waiting rooms.

Following these simple steps will not only improve your patients overall visit satisfaction, but patients who have a pleasurable experience in your waiting area will be easier to assess and treat in the examination room.

**Table 1: Waiting Room Illustrations**



*OnPoint Urgent Care, Denver, Colorado*



WellStreet Urgent Care, Atlanta, Georgia

**Distinguish your center with waiting room refreshments.**

Did you notice the “hospitality stations” in each of the waiting rooms depicted? One way to optimize your waiting room experience is to offer coffee, bottled water, juice and an array of light snacks to patients who are waiting. This can be accomplished by staff periodically asking patients if they would like any refreshments—perhaps every 20 minutes—or by offering a self-service “refreshment center.”

The advantage of staff “serving” patients is more personal attention and greater control over inventory—some patients have been known to “recoup” the cost of their visits in food from self-service stations—but the downside is staff time and distraction. If the front office gets busy, patients may perceive staff is absent, hurried or hassled in offering refreshments. Because of the need to keep staff focused on patient flow, many centers have discovered that a self-service “refreshment center” is the most cost-effective and easily managed option.

Table 2 illustrates some examples of refreshments displayed in urgent care waiting rooms. To provide consistency, you should develop a standard offering of food and beverages within your budget and consistent with your patient experience goals, and then train your staff in the maintenance and replenishment of the refreshment center.

**Table 2: Sample set-up of a waiting room refreshment center.**



Photos courtesy of Concentra Urgent Care.

As you can see, food, drink, supplies and trash are visible and accessible to patients. For the protection of young children, refreshments should be placed at a height that protects them from reaching for hot beverages and snacks that might lead to adverse reactions such as food allergies, unrestrained candy consumption, etc. Periodically, it is

recommended that staff enter the waiting room to clean and replenish the station and remind patients about the availability of beverages and snacks during high volume and wait times longer than usual.

One common set-up question is whether to run a water line for a purified water spigot, coffee maker, or ice machine. The cash outlay for millwork and the water line can run as high as \$5,000 but such should be balanced against the opportunity cost of staff time and nuisance in filling and moving coffee decanters, ice containers or providing bottled water. To save staff time in brewing and replenishing coffee (as well as eliminating waste of unconsumed coffee), a popular self-service alternative is the various single-serving coffee machines on the market (i.e. Flavia, Keurig). Patients seem to appreciate the novelty of choosing from among the various flavors and single-servings reduce waste.

Centers that choose to implement a refreshment center have the option to set-up through a mobile vendor service or to purchase the beverages, food and supplies themselves. Research vendors in your community, including coffee services, office supply houses, and warehouse club-type stores and compare options. The main objective should be to determine the cost savings, convenience to the center, and quality of the service. Table 3 lists some typical components of a waiting room hospitality station.

You should have a firm policy that the refreshments are for *patients only*—otherwise you could be adding an unintended and costly employee benefit that also looks bad to patients who see the staff indulge. Avoid snacks like popcorn that have a heavy odor that may nauseate patients. To avoid contamination, insects and pests, food and drink should be restricted to the waiting area.

**Table 3: Typical components of a waiting room hospitality station.**

<b><u>Beverages</u></b>	<b><u>Fresh Fruit</u></b>	<b><u>Individually Packaged Snacks</u></b>	<b><u>Toys or Games for Children</u></b>
Bottled or Purified Water	Apples	Mini-Pretzels	Coloring Pages w/Crayons
Apple or Orange Juice	Bananas	Granola or Cereal Bars	Activity Sheets
Coffee and Tea	<b><u>Candy</u></b>	Cheese or Peanut Butter Crackers	Yo-Yos
Hot Cocoa	Hard Candy	Dried Fruit Snacks	Balloons
Canned Soft Drinks	Suckers	Trail Mix	Squeeze Toys

**What about vending machines?**

While many urgent care centers consider placing soda and candy machines in their lobbies, such dispensers can create a “bus-station” like atmosphere that detracts from the center’s aesthetics. In addition, as a health care provider you really should only offer beverages and snacks that contribute to an image of “wellness.” Carbonated sodas, sugar-laden sport drinks, caffeinated energy drinks, and fatty snacks not meeting with these standards should not be purchased or displayed for patient consumption. This includes the popular morning assortment of doughnuts. Not only do such snacks contradict a message of “health,” but consumption of sugar and caffeine prior to a physical exam can raise a patient’s heart rate and blood sugar levels, throwing off the physical evaluation and perhaps jeopardizing some tests related to compliance physicals.

**Are you ready to serve refreshments to your patients?**

Your decision to set up a refreshment center in your urgent care center will establish a tone for your waiting environment that reflects your care and concern for the medical treatment that you provide your patients and more importantly, contribute to patient experiences that spur word-of-mouth and repeat visits.