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Region's first urgent care center for kids is set to open

By Elizabeth Simpson
The Virginian-Pilot
© January 5, 2015

CHESAPEAKE

Sick kids with more than a sniffle but less than life-threatening trauma will have a new option Wednesday when Children's Hospital of The King's Daughters opens the region's first urgent-care center exclusively for children.

The Chesapeake facility, at 817 Volvo Pkwy. in a former Blockbuster store, will gear up when most doctors' offices are closing for the day, with evening, weekend and holiday hours. It will be staffed by three pediatricians, plus a corps of pediatric nurses, X-ray technicians and lab specialists - a model that is one of the fastest growing in the country.

CHKD Urgent Care will treat children on a walk-in basis with illnesses including colds, flu, sinus and ear infections, asthma, vomiting, sports injuries, minor broken bones and cuts. Those with more serious conditions will be referred to the system's hospital in Norfolk or to Chesapeake Regional Medical Center in emergency situations.

The urgent-care business is booming. One association has tallied some 9,000 such centers nationwide, with half opening in the past five years. Growth is estimated at 8 to 10 percent annually, according to the Urgent Care Association of America. Sometimes called immediate care, the model is typically less expensive than an emergency room visit but more expensive than a primary-care doctor appointment during normal hours.

Alan Ayers, who is on the Board of Directors of the urgent-care association, said the model is appealing to parents who want the convenience of nearby, walk-in care minus the expense, and often the wait, of an emergency room. But he cautioned parents to ask about costs up front, both from the patient's insurer and the center. Some centers charge facility and procedure fees beyond the basic visit charge.

He said hospitals use the model to reach into surrounding areas and push patients toward specialists affiliated with the hospital system to improve their bottom line and provide more convenient options for patients.

Some primary-care doctors have raised concerns about urgent-care centers and so-called retail clinics in stores like Wal-Mart. They fear a fracturing of the continuity of patient care. Concerns also have been raised about siphoning

patients from other practices, some of which have evening hours, and from other hospitals.

CHKD officials say their center will be well networked with pediatric offices and specialists in its system through electronic medical records.

Dr. Theresa Guins, a CHKD pediatrician certified in emergency care, will be the medical director for the center, having worked in the children's hospital emergency department for 20 years. She said CHKD is planning to open pediatric urgent-care centers in Virginia Beach and Newport News this year, and another in the southern part of Virginia Beach in 2016.

"It's for the patient who needs attention and can't wait until morning, but doesn't need an emergency room," she said.

According to CHKD spokeswoman Sharon Cindrich, costs for an urgent-care visit will vary depending on a family's insurance plan and the services provided during the visit, but they will be comparable to the fees of other urgent-care centers.

The facility will be open from 4 to 11 p.m. on weekdays, and from 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. on weekends and holidays. Guins said the idea has been in the works for about a year, and focus group sessions found parents wanting more urgent-care options in their communities. Hospital officials found high numbers of patients in the minor-care unit of their emergency department.

Guins said they expect 8,000 to 9,000 visits this year, with an annual increase of 2,000 visits. She said CHKD officials looked at other urgent-care centers opened by pediatric hospitals elsewhere in the country.

The hospital is leasing the space for the center on Volvo Parkway; renovation costs were not available.

A statement from Chesapeake Regional Medical Center said that the new center could change the hospital's pediatric volume, but that the hospital still provides the most comprehensive emergency pediatric care in the city: "Chesapeake Regional Medical Center will continue to provide round-the-clock care to all Chesapeake citizens and we are well-equipped to treat children in our emergency department with the ability to admit them if necessary."

Health systems that open new surgical centers or hospitals typically must apply for a certificate of public need from the state before opening, but urgent-care centers do not require one, another factor in the model's growth, according to Ayers. He said that with health care reform trying to control costs, it's a way to save money on expensive emergency room visits. Also, with more people insured under the Affordable Care Act, it provides more access to health providers.

He said it has been successful mainly because it's a consumer-driven model: "People like the convenience, not needing an appointment and getting treatment at night and on weekends."

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