

## Posted vs. Actual Operating Hours

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Consumers differentiate urgent care centers based on their neighborhood locations, range of services offered without an appointment, and lower co-pays and shorter wait times than hospital emergency rooms. But perhaps most important is that urgent care provides *evening and weekend access* to basic medical care.

Despite the importance of advertised operating hours in attracting patients, many centers cut their days short—primarily to assure staff leaves work at a set time. For example, the bright red sign atop a medical office building in my community reads: “Urgent Care: Open 8am to 8pm, 7 Days a Week.” Operating hours clearly define this center’s brand to the 25,000 cars per day passing by—“we’re open when you need us.” But upon entering this center, patients are greeted by a very different message—“NO PATIENTS ACCEPTED AFTER 7:30PM.” From the consumer’s perspective, this center *doesn’t* close at 8:00pm as advertised—*it closes 30 minutes earlier*.

As an urgent care operator, I understand that some patients attempt to minimize their wait by showing up just prior to closing. While this last minute surge can be relied upon to make the day’s visit targets, it also results in providers and staff staying an hour or longer after closing—resulting in overtime pay and reduced work-life balance.

But for the mother questioning whether a child’s acutely rising illness will improve overnight—the 30 minutes prior to closing can be critical a decision-making time. How disappointed a patient would be who travels to the center with an urgent medical need—during the advertised hours—only to be turned away without service! This all too frequent occurrence in urgent care would be completely foreign to retail stores, restaurants, and other service business.

One afternoon I needed to conduct a transaction at the bank branch near my home—located 20 minutes from my office. I knew the branch closed at 6:00pm so I rushed—arriving at 6:01pm. I was relieved to find the lobby door unlocked and upon entering, the “greeter” asked if I had hurried to get there. When I responded, “yes—and I’m glad I made it,” she responded, “just so you know, even though our door says we close at 6:00, we don’t lock the doors until 6:15, and we don’t leave until every customer is served.” What a great customer service attitude!

In addition to closing “early,” many urgent care centers struggle with opening “late.” When a center advertises it opens at 8:00am and staff shows up for work at 7:55—most likely patients waiting outside at the front door at 7:45 are let in by the arriving staff, who then spends 15-20 minutes turning on lights, booting computers, and counting pharmaceuticals. Once providers realize their first patient won’t be ready until 8:30, they get into the habit of arriving late—resulting in wait times of an hour or longer at opening that put the center behind all morning. Because early morning patients trying to make it to work are pressed for time—they are more likely to be dissatisfied with long waits than patients arriving in the afternoon or evening hours.

The better solution would be for a center advertising an 8:00am opening to have staff arrive and open the doors at 7:30, providing time for set-up while early-arriving patients complete the registration paperwork to be seen promptly by the provider at 8:00.

Because operating hours are an important brand attribute of “urgent care,” at a minimum urgent care centers should be promptly register and treat arriving patients at *any time* during the posted hours. But to exceed patient expectations, consider the following implementation steps to assure you center is available when patients need it.

## Implementation Steps:

- Patients should be accepted on a walk-in basis during all advertised operating hours. Staff should be trained to never turn away a patient who has arrived prior to the posted closing time.
- Staff schedules should allow time for set-up prior to opening and wind-down prior to closing. Never should staff hours be defined as the opening and closing times of the center. Start shifts 30 minutes prior to posted opening and end shifts 30 minutes after posted closing.
- Although recurring overtime can become an added expense that reduces operating margins, urgent care operators should avoid “zero overtime” policies that incentivize staff to turn away late-arriving patients.
- To reduce the impact of overtime, consider staffing part-time resources at the beginning and end of the day and/or starting and releasing staff on a staggered schedule—the entire staff does not need to be present at opening and closing. Many service businesses designate “openers” and “closers” with specific responsibilities.
- Staff should be trained to accommodate the patient—if a patient presents a few minutes prior to opening or just after closing, staff should realize the incremental revenue and marketing opportunity to exceed the patient’s expectations.
- While some wind-down tasks—such as completing end-of-day log sheets—should be started in slow periods prior to closing, train staff that closing time is exactly that—it’s unacceptable to lock doors, turn down lights, shut down systems, quit answering the phone, or lock cash drawers at any time prior to closing.

## Consumer Examples:

**Employee Focused:** The Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles encourages drivers to present at the Deputy Registrar’s office **at least 30 minutes** before closing. The objective is to minimize overtime costs by closing the office at the exact posted time. Customers arriving less than 30 minutes prior to closing risk being turned away without service.

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09.22.2010: Columbus Deputy Registrar Moving to New Location

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Update: Puerto Rico Birth Certificate Validation  
Administrative Hearings  
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**Customer Focused:** Even though this Dallas branch of JPMorgan Chase Bank posts a 6:00pm weekday closing time, its doors are not locked until 6:15pm and staff remains until the last customer is served. The bank's objective is to capture market share by operating longer hours and providing a better customer experience than competitors. Employee schedules are coordinated to perform end-of-day tasks while accommodating customers remaining in the branch.

