How to navigate a walk-in clinic in Canada: A guide for newcomers

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Moving to a new country comes with many challenges, and health care is often one of them. Many new immigrants when they become sick or need medical advice may not know how to get medical assistance. That is where walk-in clinics become very useful.

Walk-in clinics are accessible in most of the cities and towns and are designed for prompt, same-day care.

This guide will explain walk-in clinics, how to use them, and what to anticipate when you visit.

What is a walk-in clinic?

A walk-in clinic is a medical facility where you can see a doctor or nurse practitioner without scheduling an appointment. These clinics are helpful if -

- You don't yet have a family physician.
- There isn't a family doctor available.
- You have a non-emergency medical issue that requires attention.

Important: Emergency situations should not be handled at walk-in clinics. Call 911 or visit the closest emergency room if you have severe injuries, chest pain, trouble breathing, or heavy bleeding.

What services do walk-in clinics provide?

Many common health issues can be handled at walk-in clinics. Visits are frequently made for the following reasons:

- Ear infections, colds, the flu, or sore throats
- Minor wounds, such as minor burns, cuts, or sprains
- Prescription drug refills
- Skin issues like infections or rashes
- Travel advice and vaccinations (some clinics)
- Workplace or school-related medical forms

The doctor may send you for blood work, X-rays, or other investigations, or they may refer you to a specialist if they believe you require special care.

Who can go to a walk-in clinic?

A walk-in clinic is open to everyone. If you are a newcomer with a provincial health card, you will usually not be required to pay.

Bring your provincial health card if you have one. Your province's health insurance will pay for the visit.

You will likely have to cover the cost of the visit yourself if you don't yet have a health card. Ask the clinic ahead of time about fees as they can vary.

Costs and coverage: What newcomers should know

If you have a valid provincial health card (such as BC Services Card, OHIP in Ontario, Medicare in New Brunswick, RAMQ in Quebec, MSI in Nova Scotia), the majority of walk-in visits are free. But sometimes you may be asked to pay, if:

- ➢ You don’t have health coverage: Newcomers without a health card may be charged about $40–$70 for a basic visit, they may be asked to pay extra for procedures or tests.[1]

- ➢ You are an out-of-province visitor: Some clinics will ask you to pay first, then you can request reimbursement later.

- ➢ The services not covered: Even with a health card, certain things are not included, such as:
    - Doctor’s notes or forms (e.g., for work or school)
    - Driving license medical forms
    - Wart removal
    - Ear flush/cleaning

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[1] **Note:** Private health insurance coverage (e.g. GreenShield, Canada Life, Blue Cross, Cowans, Sun Life, Desjardins, GMS, and Manulife) is not the same as a provincial health coverage. If you have private insurance, like Cowan or Manulife, you may need to pay for your clinic visit first and then submit a claim to get reimbursed. Coverage depends on your plan. Some plans will cover walk-in visits, while others will only cover emergencies. Not all clinics accept private insurance directly, so it’s best to call ahead. Keep your receipts and ask your employer for a summary of what’s covered. Claims can take time, forms and follow ups may be necessary. If you’re unsure, contact your insurance provider or employer for help.

    - Travel vaccines or cosmetic procedures

Although public funds support health care in Canada, some clinics also provide private services. Patients may occasionally feel under pressure to pay for extra services like private evaluations or wellness packages.

Note: Always ask the clinic if a service is covered or if there will be a fee before you agree.

How to find a walk-in clinic?

Most neighbourhoods in Canada have walk-in clinics. To find one in your area:

Open Google Maps on your phone and enter "walk-in clinic near me."

Consult settlement services, community centers, or friends.

To assist you in finding care, many provinces have websites or hotlines. For instance, in Ontario, you can get advice by calling Health811.

Additionally, some clinics provide virtual walk-in services, which allow you to consult with a doctor via phone or video chat. If you are unable to travel, this may be helpful.

Language barriers: Getting help

Many newcomers will find it hard to speak to the clinic staff or explain their symptoms to the doctor if they don’t speak English or French well. Don't be discouraged if you don't speak French or English well; there are ways to still communicate with the doctor and receive assistance.

Interpretation services: In Canada, many clinics use Language Line, a phone service where an interpreter joins the call. Always inquire about any interpretation services offered by the clinic.

- **Health advice lines:** Every province and territory in Canada has a free phone line you can call for non-emergency health advice. In Ontario, for example, you can call **Health811 (1-866-797-0007)**, which also offers translation support in many languages.
- **Bring support**: If possible, take a trusted friend or family member who speaks English or French to help with communication.
- **Translation apps**: You can also use translation apps to communicate with the staff and physician

- **Call a trusted friend or family member**: You can also call someone that you trust to translate for you over the phone

Note: Don't be afraid or shy to ask for assistance with interpretation. Its purpose is to make your care more transparent and safe.

Things you should bring on the day of the visit

Before visiting the clinic, make sure that you have:

- Your provincial health card if you have one.
- Either the medication bottles or a list of the drugs you are currently taking.
- Any significant test results or medical documents.
- Personal identification, such as a driver's license, passport, or other official document.

What to expect at the clinic

Here’s what usually happens when you arrive:

- Registration: Present your ID or health card at the front desk to check in.
- Wait Time: You might have to wait a few minutes, an hour, or longer, depending on how busy the clinic is. You can check wait times online at certain clinics.
- When you visit a doctor or nurse practitioner, they will inquire about your symptoms, perform an examination, and offer guidance or treatment.
- Tests or Prescriptions: You might be sent to another doctor, given a prescription, or asked to submit to a lab test if necessary.

Follow-up: Long-term follow-up may not always be offered by walk-in physicians. They might advise locating a family physician if you require continuing care.

Tips for a smooth visit

Arrive early: Clinics can get crowded, particularly on weekends and evenings. Wait times may be shortened by arriving early.

Be clear and brief: Give the doctor a thorough explanation of your symptoms so they can understand them quickly.

Bring a friend or inquire about the clinic's interpretation services if you find it difficult to understand English or French.

Don't be shy. Canadian doctors are usually very friendly. Ask the doctor to explain your diagnosis and treatment in plain language if you don't understand it.

Difference between a walk-in clinic and a family doctor

Walk-in clinic: Ideal for urgent but non-emergency situations or one-time visits. You might visit a different physician each time.

Family doctor: Offers long-term care, maintains a record of your medical history, and conducts routine check-ups.

Although it is advised that newcomers register with a family physician as soon as possible, walk-ins are a reliable alternative in the short term.

Final thoughts

At first, navigating health care in a foreign country can be overwhelming, but walk-in clinics make it easier for newcomers in Canada to access medical help quickly. They are a great option if you don't yet have a family doctor and you are ill, hurt, or in need of medical advice. Keep your health card on you, be aware of the services that are offered, and don't be afraid to ask questions.

Knowing this will help you feel ready and confident the next time you or your family members need care at a Canadian walk-in clinic.

About the author

Wakil Ahmad Kakar is a medical graduate who has successfully passed the Canadian medical licensing exams and is an aspiring residency applicant. He currently works as a Clinical Assistant in Ontario, Canada, and is passionate about helping newcomers understand and navigate the Canadian health care system.