

What to expect during an emergency psychiatric evaluation

This handout was made as a general guideline for parents and children; please note that individual hospitals and emergency rooms have varying policies.

Why is my child being sent for an emergency psychiatric evaluation?

Physicians refer children and families to the emergency room for a psychiatric evaluation when they have concerns about safety for the child/adolescent. Those safety concerns are usually around issues such as self-harm or suicide, a child or adolescent that has expressed a desire to hurt someone else, or a child/adolescent that has become so impaired by their illness that they cannot function. At the emergency room your child will be evaluated by hospital staff and physicians to determine if they are able to go home or need a higher level of care in an inpatient psychiatric hospital.

Who will see my child/adolescent during the evaluation process?

You and your child will encounter various hospital staff and physicians during the evaluation process. Initially you will be registered into the emergency room where demographic information will be taken. You will be asked for information such as you and your child's address, date of birth, social security numbers, contact information, and up to date insurance information. Most hospitals ask to make copies of your insurance card and any identification you may have. You will then be seen by a triage nurse that will take your child's vital signs and a brief history about why you are coming to the hospital. You may be seen next by the emergency room physician who will ask for information about why your child is at the emergency room for this evaluation, medical history, current medications, additional social information, and perform a physical exam. The emergency room physician may order any laboratory exams or tests they feel are appropriate. Since a physical exam will be performed your child may be asked to change into a hospital gown.

After being evaluated by an emergency physician, a psychiatric consultation will be called and you and your child will be interviewed by a psychiatrist and a determination will be made about going home versus going to an inpatient psychiatric hospital. You will be asked by several different hospital staff and physicians for similar information. This is done to make sure important information is not missed.

What happens if the decision is made to send my child to an inpatient psychiatric hospital?

Once it is determined that your child needs to be in an inpatient psychiatric facility, a Physician Emergency Certificate (PEC) is issued. Once this document is issued your child cannot leave the emergency room. The PEC allows for up to a 72 hour hold from the date and time it is issued. After it is issued an inpatient psychiatric bed, appropriate for your child's age and gender, will be located. Hospital staff will attempt to locate a bed close to the hospital, but if there is none available an available bed in Louisiana will be found. It is possible that your child will go to an inpatient psychiatric hospital anywhere in the state of Louisiana.

How long could the evaluation process take?

It can take anywhere from a few hours to 24 hours, and in some instances it could take a few days to find an available bed at an inpatient psychiatric hospital. You will be asked to stay with your child during this time period. If you are unable to stay or need to leave the hospital for any reason (to get food or clothes for your child's inpatient hospital stay) please give the staff contact numbers where they can reach you immediately.

Who should I speak with if I have concerns about the evaluation process?

Ask to speak with your nurse, the charge nurse, nursing supervisor, or attending physician if you have any concerns about the evaluation.