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Giant Eagle strep tests draw fire Store claims service is a convenience; some area doctors object

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Loaf of bread, check. Gallon of milk, got it. Strep test, sure, why not? In an expansion of medical services that has some local physicians upset and concerned, Giant Eagle grocery store customers now can purchase a five-minute test typically done in a doctor's office to detect streptococcus bacteria - a cause of strep throat.

The "rapid strep tests" are being offered to those age 3 and older at the 15 Giant Eagle stores in Ohio, including the two metro Toledo stores, as part of a company pilot project.

Store officials are touting the \$9.95 tests, which are offered in the store's pharmacies, as a "convenience" that lets people avoid waiting in doctors' offices.

"It's the same theory as offering flu shots," said Giant Eagle spokesman Mike Duffey.

"Whenever possible, where permitted by law, and where it's safe and effective, we try to provide things to make it convenient for our customers."

But some area physicians - furious that some grocery stores got shipments of flu vaccine when they couldn't get them for their patients - are criticizing Giant Eagle's decision.

"It's irresponsible for them to do this, and I think it's a really bad idea," said Dr. Donna Woodson, a Maumee family physician and president of the Toledo-Lucas County board of health.

"What's next? We walk into the frozen foods department for an exam?" said Dr. Jeffery Swartz, a Millbury family physician and president of a regional association of primary care doctors. "This is being done under the guise of community health in order to sell products."

Grocery stores offering medical tests in retail establishments is a practice growing nationwide.

For example, many pharmacies in grocery stores and elsewhere offer diabetes and blood-pressure tests. A Minneapolis company even has opened up mini-clinics staffed by nurse practitioners in some Target stores.

But Dr. Swartz and other physicians said Giant Eagle potentially is putting customers at risk.

In some cases, they note, the tests produce faulty results. If customers get a rapid test in the store and it's negative, they might assume they're fine and don't have strep throat.

Dr. Woodson said doctors' offices typically follow up a negative test with a more conclusive throat culture to make certain a patient doesn't have strep throat, which can cause serious health problems.

In addition, while a negative test result might prove a person doesn't have strep throat, it wouldn't determine if a person has a different serious condition, such as meningitis, she said.

"Meningitis can be lethal. And what if it's abscesses around the tonsils? Or a sinus problem? Or a middle-ear infection? A rapid strep test can miss a lot," Dr. Woodson said.

The Ohio State Medical Association, a professional organization representing physicians in the state, has sent a letter to the State Medical Board, asking board officials to investigate whether it's appropriate for Giant Eagle to offer the rapid strep tests. The Ohio Academy of Family Physicians also is opposed to Giant Eagle's decision and is asking the company to stop offering the tests.

"I think the approach they're taking ethically and professionally borders on practicing medicine without a license, though legally it may not," said Dr. Kenneth Bertka, a Toledo physician and past president of the state Academy.

Rob Borella, director of corporate communication for Giant Eagle, defended the sale of the tests and said stores are not trying to take the place of a physician's office.

"We clearly tell customers to have a direct consultation with their family physician, as well as any follow-up tests from their physician," he said. "From our perspective, this is just another way to help customers live a healthier life. ... We refer customers to their physicians regardless of the outcome of the test."

Dr. Woodson is skeptical of Giant Eagle's rationale for selling the tests.

"If they're saying they refer all these people to doctors' offices, then why offer [the tests] in the first place? And if it's negative, customers will come here [to the doctor's office]? I don't think so," she said.

Pharmacists at the two Toledo-area stores said yesterday they haven't sold any tests yet, and Mr. Borella said that Giant Eagle, for the moment, is not aggressively marketing the testing. Pittsburgh-based Giant Eagle also has stores in the Columbus, Cleveland, and Youngstown areas, as well as in Pittsburgh and Maryland.

Though other grocery store pharmacies offer some medical tests, none locally appear to be embracing the strep test idea. Kroger, the largest grocery chain in the Toledo area, has no plans to offer rapid strep testing, said spokesman Monica Gordon.

She said Kroger does, however, have a patient care center at one of its Columbus-area stores, and another four stores offer more comprehensive diabetes management. She added that Kroger offers a wide variety of other services, such as cholesterol and bone density screenings at many of its stores - something common in pharmacies in other retail establishments too.

And if customers happen to shop around while waiting to get the test or their results, all the better, she said.

Though most area grocery stores and other retail establishments haven't offered strep tests, some companies say there's clearly a market for more consumer-friendly medical testing. MinuteClinic, the Minneapolis-based company offering mini clinics, said sales have gone so well the company plans to expand to three more metro areas next year.

"It's all about convenience. There's no appointment, and you're in and out in 15 minutes. With people's lifestyles today, it's just not acceptable to wait anymore for two

hours in a doctor's waiting room," said Tom Charland, a senior vice president for MinuteClinic.

MinuteClinic has sites in six Target stores in the Minneapolis area and eight in the Baltimore area. The company also has locations in three Minneapolis-area grocery stores, three on corporate campuses in Minneapolis, and one on the campus of the University of Minnesota.

The six primary services offered are testing and treatment for strep throat, ear infections, female bladder infections, sinus infections, pink eye, and bronchitis. Nurse practitioners staff the clinics every day and can prescribe medication when necessary. The company accepts insurance, though about 15 percent of its customers pay in cash for visits that average about \$44. Mr. Charland said a Minnesota study found the typical cost of a doctor's office visit for sore throat in Minnesota was \$109 if a patient paid in cash.

Mr. Charland said he welcomes the debate on whether clinics like his are a good idea. "People don't like to wait, especially needless waiting," he said. "What drives patients crazy is they get through the waiting room and then sit by themselves for an hour in an exam room. And the magazines are two years old. We don't need magazines at our clinics."