Everybody’s made that quick dash into a big-box store on the drive home from the office. You know the drill: run in, pick up some dog food, grab a quart of milk, undergo a little surgery and you’re back on your way.

Hang on. What?

It was bound to happen sooner or later. With HMOs in a cost spiral and 59 million Americans with no health insurance at all, retailers like Walgreens, Rite Aid and Target have sniffed an opportunity and moved into the healthcare business, opening up in-store medical clinics that’ll do a surprising variety of things to your person—treating your pimples, testing for pregnancy and even suturing wounds shut. Five years ago, nobody knew what a “retail clinic” was; today, there are some 1,100 of them. Expect twice as many in the next four years.

It’s not hard to see the logic here. Not only do these retailers get to charge for their services, but also “clinics provide additional retail revenue by significantly increasing store traffic,” says Devon M. Herrick of the pro-business think tank National Center for Policy Analysis. The clinics also route customers (fresh prescriptions in hand) directly to the store’s pharmacy counter, where the real money’s made. “It’s a trifecta of profit,” says Kevin Hausker, CEO of digital-records company Moditi, who’s been wary of watching the retail-clinic explosion. “This is probably one of the most brilliant marketing ideas ever.”

And one of the most controversial. While studies have shown that “drive-thru doctors” generally provide a respectable level of care, the truth is that these clinics are seldom staffed by actual M.D.s and instead rely on nurses and physician assistants. Critics also charge that clinics replace the traditional doctor-patient relationship with an à la carte approach. “You’re putting your healthcare into silos where nobody has ownership of you as an entire person,” says Dr. Glen Stream, president-elect of the American Academy of Family Physicians, who officially opposes the ongoing expansion of services these retail clinics offer.

But, like it or not, the “doc-in-a-box” trend shows no signs of slowing down. Here’s a look at the retailers wearing white coats.

CVS

Asthma Monitoring [$79]

Name of operation: MinuteClinic
The setup: CVS marketing of its healthcare services—“Quick, Affordable, Convenient”—feels a bit fast food-like, but the clinic does boast a 95 percent customer satisfaction rating. MinuteClinic offers a range of treatments for everything from sprained ankles to jellyfish stings (an unlikely injury in most states but, hey, it’s nice to know it’s there if you need it).
Market presence: From its first store in 2004, MinuteClinic has grown to 500 locations in 26 states. The company plans to add 100 clinics a year for the next five years.

Acne Remedy [$59] @ Rite Aid

Upset Stomach Treatment [$65] @ Walmart

Blister Treatment [$79] @ cvs

WALMART

Bladder Infection Treatment [$65]

Name of operation: The Clinic at Walmart
The setup: No doubt cognizant of the attention it would draw by getting into the healthcare biz, Walmart leases its clinic space to “independent local hospitals or health systems that the community already knows and trusts,” according to Walmart’s corporate Web site. A routine “get well visit” ranges from relief for a sore throat to ear wax or a strep test.
Market presence: By our count, 117 locations in 26 states

Target Clinics are now operating in Florida, Illinois, Minnesota and Maryland.

Athletes Foot Treatment [$59]

Name of operation: Target Clinic
The setup: Much like its fellow behemoth Walmart, Target was no doubt aware that getting into medicine would draw plenty of scrutiny, which is why the Web site is tinged all over to point out that its team adheres to the guidelines of the American Medical Association and a ton of other health watchdogs. Price average $59 for treatment of everything from an earache to pink eye.
Market presence: Target Clinics are now operating in Florida, Illinois, Minnesota and Maryland.

WHAT ELSE COULD BIG-BOX STORES SELL? HEALTHCARE!

RITE AID

Head Lice Removal [$59]

Name of operation: Lindora Health Clinic
The setup: Rite Aid partnered with Lindora in 2006 to offer a range of healthcare services throughout California, making Rite Aid the smallest player on the retail-clinic landscape. Right now, only nine units in California offer Rite Aid the smallest player on the retail-clinic landscape.

Lindora Health Clinic

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