

Understanding fevers in children

Fevers are one of the most common reasons children visit their healthcare providers. Although it can be scary when your child's temperature raises, fevers usually do not indicate anything serious in otherwise healthy children. In fact, fever alone causes no harm and can actually be a good thing, as it is often the body's way of fighting infections. All fevers do not need to be treated; however, a high fever can make your child uncomfortable and worsen problems such as dehydration. It is important to learn about fevers, how to measure and treat them, and know when to call your child's doctor.

Facts on Fever

Although 98.6°F (37°C) is typically thought of as normal body temperature, that does not mean any number above 98.6°F is a fever. Most experts do not consider a temperature to be a fever in a child until it reaches 100.4°F (38°C) rectally.

Fever alone is not an illness, but rather a symptom. Fever itself does cause recognizable signs and symptoms in your child that can make him or her feel terrible, such as decreased activity, poor appetite, irritability, increased heart rate and breathing rate. When fever symptoms affect your child's well-being, giving him or her a fever reducing medication can be a good idea. If your child has a fever, but is sleeping well, in a good mood and is drinking well, then you don't necessarily need to give a fever reducer. Most importantly, understand that your child's temperature doesn't tell you much about how sick your child is. He or she could have a very high fever with a mild illness or have a low-grade fever with a life-threatening illness.

Temperature taking tips

There are many options when choosing a thermometer, but no matter what you choose, be sure you know how to use it correctly. Keep and follow the manufacturer's recommendations.

There are four ways to take a child's temperature: oral (in the mouth), rectal (in the bottom), axillary (under the arm) and tympanic (in the ear). The best method will depend on your child's age and temperament. For children younger than three months, take a rectal temperature. For children age three months to 4 years a rectal or tympanic reading will be most accurate. For children 4 years and older, take an oral temperature. While forehead and pacifier thermometers may be able to tell you if your child has a fever, they are not as reliable as oral or rectal digital thermometer readings.

(continued below)

Tell your provider how you took the temperature (oral, forehead thermometer, etc.) and the reading, rather than worrying about adding or subtracting a degree.

Relieving fever symptoms

- If your child is uncomfortable, give him or her acetaminophen or ibuprofen based on the package recommendations for age or weight. Unless instructed by a doctor, never give aspirin to a child. Infants under two months should not be given any medication for fever without being seen by a doctor. Medication will usually bring a temperature down, but won't return it to normal and won't treat the underlying cause for the fever.
- Offer fluids often to avoid dehydration, such as water, soup and popsicles. Avoid drinks with caffeine.
- Make sure your child gets plenty of rest. Keep your child home from school or childcare, returning only when their temperature has been normal for 24 hours.

When to call your child's health care provider

- Your baby who is less than three months old has a rectal temperature at or above 100.4 °F (38°C).
- Your child is between 3 months and 3 years old and has a fever of 102.2 °F (39°C) or higher or has had a fever more than 24 hours.
- Your child who is 3 years or older has had a fever for 72 hours.
- Your child has a specific complaint or discomfort (painful urination, sore throat, rash, earache, abdominal pain, etc.).
- They have repeated vomiting or diarrhea or any signs of dehydration (urinating less than usual, no tears, or less alert/active than usual).
- Your child is having difficulty breathing or is breathing faster than normal.

All children get fevers and a majority will be back to normal within a few days. For older infants and kids, the way they are acting is far more important than their temperature. But, if you are ever in doubt about what to do or what might be causing your child's fever, always be in touch with your child's doctor for advice.

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