

Fever in children

What is a fever?

A fever is when your child's body temperature is higher than normal. A normal body temperature is about 37° Celsius but this can vary during the day. In children, a temperature over 38°C indicates a fever. It does not indicate a serious illness. A fever needs to reach about 42°C to cause harm to your child (or damage their brain). This is very rare.

What causes a fever?

A fever is usually caused by an infection somewhere in the body.

Some types of infections that lead to fever include:

- viral (caused by a virus) – around nine out of ten children with a fever will have a viral illness, such as cold, flu or gastroenteritis
- bacterial (caused by bacteria) – such as some ear infections, pneumonia or urine infections.

The fever itself is not harmful and your child's temperature will return to normal when the infection settles.

Babies under three months of age are most at risk when they have a fever and need to be checked by a doctor or health care professional.

What are the symptoms?

A child may:

- look flushed and feel hot (their hands and feet may feel cool)
- feel miserable and tired (they may want to sleep more)
- breathe quicker and/or their heartbeat is fast or 'pounding'
- not want to eat.

These symptoms are all due to the fever and will resolve when your child's temperature returns to normal. Fevers are very common in childhood. Your child's temperature will go up and down, which is the body's natural way of fighting an infection. This is normal and should not be a cause for concern.

Children may get sick with a viral illness and develop a fever several times in one year. This is because children often get sick from other children who are sick, usually by sharing toys, food and drink and simply through coughing and sneezing. Getting sick helps children to build a stronger immune system, and is a normal part of childhood.

Treatment

It is not always necessary to treat a fever. You may be advised to give your child medication such as paracetamol or ibuprofen, to make your child more comfortable. Medication is recommended if your child is miserable, irritable or in pain, rather than to treat the fever itself. The fever is not harmful and helps your child's body fight the infection. By reducing the fever, your child's illness may be prolonged.

If your child has a viral illness they are likely to get better without treatment, and antibiotics will not be helpful. If your child has a bacterial infection they may need antibiotics to fight the infection.

The cause of a child's fever may not be obvious. Occasionally your child may need to have some tests (such as blood and urine samples) to help diagnose the cause of the illness.

Home care

Give your child plenty to drink. Offer small frequent drinks of clear fluids (such as water or diluted juice). This is especially important if your child is vomiting or has diarrhoea. If you are breastfeeding, offer the breast more often and give cooled boiled water in between times, if needed.

Do not worry if your baby or child does not eat. They will get their appetite back once they are feeling better (usually after two to three days). Fluids are most important as this helps to prevent dehydration (loss of water) in your child.

Consider giving your child paracetamol (such as Panadol) for pain or discomfort.

Carefully check the label for the correct dose and make sure you are not giving your child any other products containing paracetamol (such as some cough and pain medicines and cold and flu preparations).

Make your child comfortable with plenty of cuddles and reassurance. Encourage your child to rest or play quietly if they are unwell.

Do not put your child in a cold bath or in a cold draft, and do not give your child aspirin.

Sponging a child with a fever does not help to lower the fever and may make your child more distressed. Dress them for comfort.

Taking your child's temperature

It is better to be guided by the way your child looks or feels than to keep checking their temperature. Thermometers can be purchased from a pharmacy if required. Follow the instructions as each thermometer is different.

What to expect:

Most children recover over two to three days without further treatment.

Febrile convulsions

Some children with a fever can have febrile (fever) convulsions (a fit or seizure) where the child becomes unconscious and their arms and legs jerk. Most seizures do not last long, usually less than two minutes and do not result in brain damage. A seizure is frightening to a parent but it is not dangerous unless it lasts a long time (usually more than five minutes). This does not mean your child has epilepsy.

Using paracetamol to 'control' the fever will not prevent a seizure and may not lower the temperature.

What should I do if my child has a fit?

- Stay calm and do not panic.
- Do not force or put anything into the child's mouth, including your fingers.
- Ensure your child is safe by placing them on the floor and removing any objects that could injure them.
- Note the time the fit started and stopped, to tell the doctor.
- Once the fit has stopped place your child on their side and make them comfortable.
- Do not shake or slap your child to wake them.
- Do not restrain your child.

- Take your child to your local doctor, health care professional or emergency department as soon as possible.

If you are very worried call an ambulance (dial 111).

Seeking help

In a medical emergency go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 111).

See your local doctor or health care professional if your child:

- refuses to drink for 12-24 hours
- has excessive vomiting or diarrhoea
- complains of a stiff neck/light hurting their eyes
- is drowsy/looks unwell
- develops a rash
- is under three months old (for a review)
- is no better in two or three days.

Disclaimer: This health information is for general education purposes only. Please consult with your doctor or other health professional to make sure this information is right for you.