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Fever — Understanding a Fever

A fever is a body temperature that is higher than normal. Your child's normal body temperature varies with his age, general health, activity level, the time of day and how much clothing he is wearing. Everyone's temperature tends to be lower early in the morning and higher between late afternoon and early evening. Body temperature also will be slightly higher with strenuous exercise.

Most pediatricians consider any thermometer reading above 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit (38 degrees Celsius) a sign of a fever. This number may vary depending on the method used for taking your child's temperature. If you call your pediatrician, say which method you used.

If your child has a fever, it is probably a sign that her body is fighting an infection. When your child becomes ill because of a virus or bacteria, her body may respond by increasing body temperature. It is important to remember that, except in the case of heat stroke, fever itself is not an illness — only a symptom of one. Fever itself also is not a sign that your child needs an antibiotic.

Many conditions, such as an ear infection, a common cold, the flu, a urinary tract infection or pneumonia, may cause a child to develop a fever. In some cases, medication, injury, poison or an extreme level of overactivity may produce a fever. An environment that is too hot may result in heat stroke, a potentially dangerous rise in body temperature. It is important to look for the cause of the fever.

Fevers are generally harmless and help your child fight infection. They can be considered a good sign that your child's immune system is working and the body is trying to rid itself of the infection.

If your child has a fever, her heart and breathing rates naturally will speed up. You may notice that your child feels warm. She may appear flushed or perspire more than usual. Her body also will require more fluids.

Some children feel fine when they have a fever. However, most will have symptoms of the illness that is causing the fever. Your child may have an earache, a sore throat, a rash or a stomachache. These signs can provide important clues as to the cause of your child's fever.

Making Your Child Comfortable

While most fevers don't require a call to your pediatrician, there are certain circumstances when a fever could indicate something more serious.

Call your pediatrician immediately if your child has a fever and:

- Looks very ill, is unusually drowsy or is very fussy
- Has been in an extremely hot place, such as an overheated car
- Has additional symptoms, such as a stiff neck, severe headache, severe sore throat, severe ear pain, an unexplained rash, or repeated vomiting or diarrhea
- Has a condition that suppresses immune responses, such as sickle-cell disease or cancer or is taking steroids
- Has had a seizure
- Is younger than 2 months of age and has a rectal temperature of 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit (38 degrees Celsius) or higher

A child older than 6 months of age who has a temperature below 101 degrees Fahrenheit (38.3 degrees Celsius) probably does not need to be treated for fever, unless the child is uncomfortable. Observe her behavior. If she is eating and sleeping well and is able to play, you may wait to see if the fever improves by itself.

In the meantime:

- Keep her room comfortably cool
- Make sure that she is dressed in light clothing
- Encourage her to drink fluids such as water, diluted fruit juices, or a commercially prepared oral electrolyte solution
- Be sure that she does not overexert herself

There are also medications you can give your child to reduce his temperature if he is uncomfortable. Both acetaminophen and ibuprofen are safe and effective in proper doses. Be sure to follow the correct dosage and medication schedule for your child. Remember, any medication can be dangerous if you give your child too much.

Ibuprofen should only be used for children older than 6 months of age. It should not be given to children who are vomiting constantly or are dehydrated. Do not use aspirin to treat your child's fever. Aspirin has been linked with side effects such as an upset stomach, intestinal bleeding and, most seriously, Reye syndrome.

If your child is vomiting and unable to take medication by mouth, your pediatrician may recommend a rectal suppository for your child. Acetaminophen suppositories can be effective in reducing fever in a vomiting child.

Read the label on all medications to make sure that your child receives the right dose for his age and weight. To be safe, talk to your pediatrician before giving your child any medication to treat fever if he is younger than 2 years of age.

An alternative to over-the-counter medications is to sponge your child with lukewarm water. Sponging may reduce your child's temperature as water evaporates from her skin. Your pediatrician can advise you on this method.

Your pediatrician may recommend that you try sponging your child with lukewarm water in cases such as the following:

- Your child's temperature is above 104 degrees Fahrenheit (40 degrees Celsius)
- She is vomiting and unable to take medication
- She has had a febrile seizure in the past

Do not use cold water to sponge your child, as this could cause shivering. That could increase her temperature. Never add alcohol to the water. Alcohol can be absorbed into the skin or inhaled, causing serious problems such as a coma.

Usually 5 to 10 minutes in the tub is enough time for a child's temperature to start dropping. If your child becomes upset during the sponging, simply let her play in the water. If she is still bothered by the bath, it is better to remove her even if she has not been in long enough to reduce her temperature. Also remove her from the bath if she continues to shiver because shivering may increase body temperature.

Do not try to reduce your child's temperature to normal too quickly. This could cause the temperature to rebound higher.

Be sure to call your pediatrician if your child still "acts sick" once the fever is brought down, or if you feel that your child is very sick. Also call if the fever persists for:

- More than 24 hours in a child younger than 2 years of age
- More than three days in a child 2 years of age or older

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How to Take a Temperature

While you often can tell if your child is warmer than usual by feeling his forehead, only a thermometer can tell if he has a fever and how high the temperature is. There are several types of thermometers and methods for taking your child's temperature.

Mercury thermometers should not be used. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) encourages parents to remove mercury thermometers from their homes to prevent accidental exposure to this toxin.

Rectal

If your child is younger than 3 years of age, taking his temperature with a rectal digital thermometer provides the best reading.

1. Clean the end of the thermometer with rubbing alcohol or soap and water. Rinse it with cool water. Do not rinse with hot water.
2. Put a small amount of lubricant, such as petroleum jelly, on the end.

3. Place your child belly down across your lap or on a firm surface. Hold him by placing your palm against his lower back, just above his bottom.
4. With the other hand, turn on the thermometer switch and insert the thermometer 0.5" to 1" into the anal opening. Hold the thermometer in place loosely with two fingers, keeping your hand cupped around your child's bottom. Do not insert the thermometer too far.
5. Hold in place for about one minute, until you hear the "beep." Remove the thermometer to check the digital reading.

Oral

Once your child is 4 or 5 years of age, you may prefer taking his temperature by mouth with an oral digital thermometer.

1. Clean the thermometer with lukewarm soapy water or rubbing alcohol. Rinse with cool water.
2. Turn on the switch and place the sensor under his tongue toward the back of his mouth.
3. Hold in place for about one minute, until you hear the "beep." Check the digital reading.
4. For a correct reading, wait at least 15 minutes after your child has had a hot or cold drink before putting the thermometer in his mouth.

Ear

Tympanic thermometers, which measure temperature inside the ear, are another option for older babies and children.

- Gently put the end of the thermometer in the ear canal. Press the start button. You will get a digital reading of your child's temperature within seconds.

While it provides quick results, this thermometer needs to be placed correctly in your child's ear to be accurate. Too much earwax may cause the reading to be incorrect.

Underarm (Axillary)

Although not as accurate, if your child is older than 3 months of age, you can take his underarm temperature to see if he has a fever.

1. Place the sensor end of either an oral or rectal digital thermometer in your child's armpit.
2. Hold his arm tightly against his chest for about one minute, until you hear the "beep."
3. Check the digital reading.

Other methods for taking your child's temperature are available. They are not recommended at this time. Ask your pediatrician for advice.