

Fever and Your Child



A fever is usually a sign that the body is fighting an illness or infection. Fevers are generally harmless. In fact, they can be considered a good sign that your child's immune system is working and the body is trying to heal itself. While it is important to look for the cause of a fever, the main purpose for treating it is to help your child feel better. Read on to find out more about how to tell if your child has a fever and how to manage a fever.

What is a fever?

A fever is a body temperature that is higher than normal. Normal body temperature varies with age, general health, activity level, and time of day. Even how much clothing a person wears can affect body temperature.

Most pediatricians consider a temperature above 100.4°F (38°C) a sign of a fever.

Signs and symptoms of a fever

If your child has a fever, she may feel warm, appear flushed, or sweat more than usual. She may also be more thirsty than usual.

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 the fever.

When to call the doctor

Call your child's doctor right away if your child has a fever and

- Looks very ill, is unusually drowsy, or is very fussy
- Has been in a very hot place, such as an overheated car
- Has other symptoms such as a stiff neck, severe headache, severe sore throat, severe ear pain, an unexplained rash, or repeated vomiting or diarrhea
- Has immune system problems such as sickle cell disease or cancer, or is taking steroids
- Has had a seizure
- Is younger than 2 months and has a rectal temperature of 100.4°F (38°C) or higher

Treating your child's fever

If your child is older than 6 months and has a temperature below 101°F (38.3°C), she probably does not need to be treated for the fever (see other side) unless she is uncomfortable. Watch 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.

What you can do

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

Taking your child's temperature

While you often can tell if your child is warmer than usual by feeling her forehead, only a thermometer can tell how high the temperature is. A **digital thermometer** can be used to take a rectal (in the bottom), oral (in the mouth), or axillary (under the arm) temperature. Your child's doctor can recommend how to use it depending on your child's age. Taking a rectal or oral temperature is more accurate than taking an axillary temperature.

Ways to use a digital thermometer by age

Child's age	Rectal	Oral	Axillary
Newborn to 3 months	x		
3 months to 3 years	x		x
4 to 5 years	x	x	x
5 years and older		x	x

Tympanic (ear) thermometers are another option for older babies and children. However, while it gives quick results, it needs to be placed correctly in your child's ear to be accurate. Too much earwax can cause the reading to be incorrect.

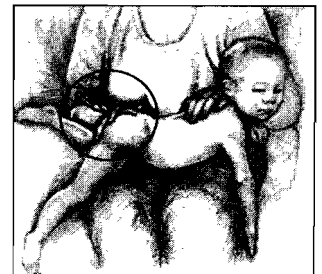
While other methods for taking your child's temperature are available, they are not recommended at this time. Ask your child's doctor for advice.

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

How to use a digital thermometer

If your child is younger than 3 years, taking a rectal temperature gives the best reading. The following is how to take a **rectal temperature**:

- Clean the end of the thermometer with rubbing alcohol or soap and water. Rinse it with cool water. Do not rinse it with hot water.
- Put a small amount of lubricant, such as petroleum jelly, on the end.
- 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. Or place your child face up and bend his legs to his chest. Rest your free hand against the back of the thighs.



Rectal (in the child's bottom)—belly down

- With the other hand, turn the thermometer on and insert it ½ inch to 1 inch into the anal opening. Do not insert it too far. Hold the thermometer in place loosely with 2 fingers, keeping your hand cupped around your child's bottom. Keep it there for about 1 minute, until you hear the "beep." Then remove and check the digital reading.
- Be sure to label the rectal thermometer so it's not accidentally used in the mouth.



Rectal—belly up

Once your child is 4 or 5 years of age, you can take his temperature by mouth. The following is how to take an **oral temperature**:

- Clean the thermometer with lukewarm soapy water or rubbing alcohol. Rinse with cool water.
- Turn the thermometer on and place the tip under his tongue toward the back of his mouth. Hold in place for about 1 minute, until you hear the "beep." Check the digital reading.
- 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.



Oral (in the child's mouth)

Although not as accurate, if your child is older than 3 months, you can take his underarm temperature to see if he has a fever. The following is how to take an **axillary temperature**:

- Place the tip of a digital thermometer in your child's armpit.
- Hold his arm tightly against his chest for about 1 minute, until you hear the "beep." Check the digital reading.



Axillary (under the child's arm)

How to reduce a fever with medicine

Acetaminophen and **ibuprofen** are safe and effective medicines for reducing fevers. They do not need a prescription and are available at grocery stores and drugstores. However, keep the following in mind:

- Ibuprofen should only be used for children older than 6 months. 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 cannot take anything by mouth, a rectal suppository may be needed. Acetaminophen comes in suppository form and can help reduce a fever in a vomiting child.
- Before giving your child any medicine, read the label to make sure that you are giving the right dose for his age and weight. Also, if your child is taking other medicines, check the ingredients. If they include acetaminophen or ibuprofen, let your child's doctor know. To be safe, talk with your child's doctor before giving your child any medicine to treat a fever if he is younger than 2 years.

How to reduce a fever with sponging

Your child's doctor may recommend that you try sponging your child to reduce a fever if

- Your child's temperature is above 104°F (40°C).
- Your child is vomiting and unable to take any medicine.

Use lukewarm water, not cold water. Cold water can cause shivering and increase the temperature. Never add rubbing alcohol to the water. Rubbing 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 fever 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 take her out even if she has not been in long enough to reduce the fever. Also remove her from the bath if she continues to shiver because shivering can raise her temperature.

Do not try to reduce a fever too quickly. This could cause it to rebound higher.

Be sure to call your child's doctor if your child still "acts sick" once her 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
- More than 3 days in a child 2 years of age or older

What if my child has a febrile seizure?

In some young children, fever can trigger seizures. While this can be frightening, seizures are usually harmless. During a seizure your child may look strange for a few minutes; shake; then stiffen, twitch, and roll his eyes. If this happens,

- Place him on the floor or bed, away from any hard or sharp objects.
- Turn his head to the side so that any saliva or vomit can drain from his mouth.
- Do not put anything into his mouth, not even a finger.
- Call your child's doctor.

Your child's doctor will want to check your child, especially if it is his first seizure. It is important to look for the cause of the febrile seizure.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

Digital thermometer drawings by Anthony Alex LeTourneau

From your doctor

American Academy
of Pediatrics



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