

Fever: Home Care (And fever facts)

What is a fever?

A normal body temperature is 98.6° F (37°C). Your child's temperature can be taken three ways.

- **Oral.** Taken in the mouth, under the tongue.
- **Axillary.** Under the armpit.
- **Rectal.** In the anus (butt).

Body temperatures between 98.6 and 100.4 ° F (37°C and 38°C) are not considered fevers. They are sometimes seen in healthy children. Things other than illness that can cause these slightly higher temperatures include:

- Being dressed too warmly.
- Having too little fluids to drink.
- Being very active.

Temperatures of 100.5 ° F (38.1°C) or higher are considered fevers. If you need to tell the doctor what your child's temperature is, do not add or subtract a degree. Give the number that was on the thermometer. Also say where you took the temperature (mouth, armpit or anus).

What causes it?

A fever might mean that your child is sick. Look for other signs of illness. Has your child recently been around other people who were sick? Has your child just had an immunization or shot? Does your child:

- Have a sore throat, a cold or muscle aches?
- Have vomiting, diarrhea or doesn't feel like eating?
- Act very sleepy or is hard to wake up?
- Act crabby or look sick?
- Have pain anywhere in the body?



Our brains often create fevers to help our immune system (the part of our body designed to fight infection), which works better at higher temperatures. **Fevers above 102°F (38.9°C) can be very uncomfortable, but are very rarely dangerous.** See page 3 for common myths and facts about fevers.

How is a fever treated?

- If your child feels chilled, cover them with light clothes and light covers only. Don't over dress your child. Heavy clothes or covers will cause the temperature to go up.
- Have your child rest or play quietly.
- Give your child plenty of liquids.

Treatment (continued)

- Older children may have water, fruit juices and soft drinks, ice chips, Popsicles®, Jell-O® and ice cream.
- Do not use rubbing alcohol on your child's body to help bring the fever down. **Using rubbing alcohol can be deadly for children if they breathe it into their lungs accidentally.** The alcohol can also cause your child to be chilled and to shiver. This can make the body temperature go up even higher.
- Check your child's temperature every 3 to 4 hours. If using an oral thermometer, wait at least 15 minutes after your child has eaten or had anything to drink.
- Check with your doctor or nurse to see if you can give your child a fever medicine such as acetaminophen (Tylenol®, Tempra®) or ibuprofen (Motrin®, Advil®). These are often used to treat the discomfort that can be caused by fever.
- If your child becomes more comfortable and is acting more like him or her-self after taking a fever medication, that is more important than the numbers on the thermometer. Your child's fever might not go away completely, or it might come back right when the medicine wears off. This just means is that his or her body is still working to fight the infection.
- **Do not give your child aspirin** without first checking with your doctor or nurse. Aspirin may cause Reye Syndrome. This is a rare but serious illness.

ALERT: Call your child's doctor, nurse, or clinic if you have any questions or concerns or if your child:

- Is younger than 3 months old and has a rectal temperature of 100.5°F (38.1°C) or higher.
- Is under 1 year old, has sunken eyes, no tears when crying, and has no damp diaper for 8 hours. These are signs of dehydration.
- Is over 1 year old and has sunken eyes, no tears when crying and no urine for 12 hours. These are signs of dehydration.
- Is less than 2 years of age and has a fever that lasts more than 24 hours.
- Is over 2 years old and has a fever over 100.5° (38.1°C) for over 72 hours.
- Looks very sick or is in pain.
- Has a seizure. If this happens, your child may fall down and have jerky, uncontrollable movements or the body may stiffen. Your child may be unconscious. **Call "9-1-1" if your child is unconscious.**
- Has special health care needs that were not covered by this information.

Note: Rectal temperatures tend to be higher than oral temperatures. Axillary temperatures tend to be lower. Do not add or subtract degrees. Just tell your healthcare provider the number on the thermometer and how/where you took your child's temperature.

This teaching sheet is meant to help you care for your child. It does not take the place of medical care. Talk with your healthcare provider for diagnosis, treatment, and follow-up.

Fever Myths and Facts

Parents are often fearful of fevers. This is what is both true and false about fevers.

Myths (false) 	Facts and truths about fever 
All fevers are bad for children.	Fevers help the fight infections. A baby younger than 3 months old with fever should see a healthcare provider right away. This is not because the fever itself is dangerous, but because young babies have a higher risk of serious infection.
Fevers are caused by infection.	Fevers are caused by the brain to help the body fight infection. Our immune system works better at a higher temperature.
Feed a cold, starve a fever.	Fevers cause the body to lose fluids through sweat and breathing. Give extra fluids during fever and don't worry if your child isn't hungry when ill.
Fevers over 104°F (40°C) are dangerous and can harm the brain. Fevers will keep going up if medicine is not given.	Fevers that occur during an infection don't cause brain damage. The brain will not create a fever high enough to hurt itself. The brain has a thermostat, so fevers from infection normally stop rising at 103°F to 104°F (39.4°C to 40°C). Young children tend to have higher thermostats than older children or adults. Medicine is not always needed.
All fevers need to be treated with medicine.	Fevers need to be treated only if they cause discomfort. Most often that means fevers over 102°F (39°C).
Febrile seizures can be harmful.	Seizures can occur with fever in about 3 to 5% of preschool children. Although they look very scary, they do not cause brain damage, learning problems or epilepsy (seizures that occur without fever). They usually stop in 5 minutes.
Medicine will bring a fever down to normal.	With treatment, most fevers come down 2° or 3°F (1.1° or 1.7° C). Your child's comfort is more important than the height of the fever.
Once the fever comes down with medicines, it should stay down.	A fever often lasts 2 to 3 days with most viral illnesses. When the medicine wears off, the fever will come back if the body is still fighting the infection. Once the body overpowers the infection the fever will go away.
If the fever is high, it is serious. The exact number of the temperature is important.	The number is not as important as how your child looks. If the fever is high, the infection may or may not be serious. If your child looks very sick even after being given medicine, the cause is more likely to be serious. Your child should be seen by a healthcare provider.
Temperatures between 98.7°F and 100.5°F (37.1°C to 37.8°C) are low-grade fevers.	It is normal for the body's temperature to change through the day. It peaks in the late afternoon and evening. A low-grade fever is 100.5°F to 102°F (37.8°C to 39°C).