

Fever in Children

Information for parents and/or caregivers

What is fever?

A fever is when your child's body temperature is higher than normal. Your child's body temperature ranges from 36.5 – 37.5°C. In children, a temperature over 38°C indicates a fever.

A high fever does not necessarily mean your child has a serious illness.

The fever itself is not harmful. Fever is the body's natural response to help fight infection, 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.

What causes a fever?

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

Some types of infection that lead to fever include:

- Viral (caused by a virus) such as cold, flu or gastroenteritis
Viral infections are common
- Bacterial (caused by bacteria) such as some ear infections, pneumonia, or urine infections

What are the symptoms?

Your child may:

- Look flushed and feel hot (their hands and feet may feel cool)
- Feel miserable and tired (they may want to sleep more)
- Vomiting
- Breathe quicker and/or their heartbeat is fast or 'pounding'
- Not wanting to eat/or drink
- In pain

These symptoms are all due to the fever and symptoms will resolve when your child's temperature returns to normal.

Are fevers bad?

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 several times a year with a viral illness and develop a fever several times a 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.

A few children can have convulsions (fits) when they have a fever. This may happen if your child's temperature goes up suddenly. Febrile convulsions are common and do not usually cause any long term health effects (see febrile convulsion information sheet).

Treatment

See your doctor if your child has the following symptoms with their fever:

- Complaining of a stiff neck or light hurting their eyes
- Vomiting and refusing to drink much
- A rash
- More sleepy than usual
- Problems with breathing
- If your child's in pain
- Fever for more than three days
- Recent overseas travel.
- Pain that doesn't get better with pain relief medication

REMEMBER:

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

If your child has a viral illness they will get better without treatment and antibiotics will not be helpful. It is not always necessary to treat a fever. Medications such as paracetamol or ibuprofen are recommended if your child is miserable, irritable or in pain (see paracetamol).

If your child has a bacterial infection they may need antibiotics to fight the infection.

The cause of your 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.

At home care

- Lots of cuddles and reassurance
- Encourage your child to rest or play quietly if they are unwell
- Give your child plenty to drink. Offer small frequent drinks of clear fluid (water, diluted fruit juice, cordial) if your child is less than 6 months old give extra breastfeeds, cooled boiled water or bottles.
- Dress your child in enough clothing so that they are not shivering

- Tepid sponging (sponging with slightly warm water) and fanning children is not recommended
- Don't worry if your child refuses to eat. They will get their appetite back once they feel better (usually in two-three days) fluids are most important as this helps prevent dehydration (loss of water) in your child

What to expect?

- Most children recover over two or three days without further treatment.
- Watch your child for signs that their illness is getting worse.
- See your local doctor if your child is not improving within a couple of days

Paracetamol

- Paracetamol is also known as Panadol®, Tylenol®, Dymadon®.
- If your child seems well and is happy, there is no need to treat a fever with paracetamol.
- If the fever is above 38.5°C and your child is miserable or has other symptoms such as a sore throat, they may be given paracetamol. Follow the correct instructions on the packaging
- Paracetamol may not take the fever away but the aim is to make your child feel better.
- Make sure when giving paracetamol for fever that your child has not had any other medicine containing paracetamol in the last four hours.

For more information

- See your family doctor
- For 24 hour health advice call - Healthdirect Australia 1800 022 222
- Parent Helpline 1300 364 100
- Local emergency department

Adapted from:

Paediatric clinical practice guidelines: SA health: Fever without focus

Up to Date (Aug 2015) : Patient Information – Fever in Children (beyond the basics)

Fever in children: Kids Health Information, Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne

Fever in children: Health Direct Australia

Fact sheet, Fever: The Children's Hospital at Westmead

Fever in children: Emergency department fact sheet, Department of Health Victoria

For more information

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