

# Fever

Let's face it, fevers can be scary for parents. When your child is burning up, it can be hard to think straight and make important decisions. Learning what causes fevers and how to treat them will ease your anxiety and help you take control of the situation.

## What Causes a Fever?

Everyone has his or her own internal "thermostat" that regulates body temperature, and normal body temperature is around 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit plus or minus about one degree (37 degrees Celsius, plus or minus about 0.6 degrees). When the body detects an infection or other illness, the brain responds by raising the body temperature to help fight the condition.

A rectal temperature over 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit is considered a fever. It is not always necessary for a child with a fever to see their doctor. It depends on the age of the child and the other symptoms they have.

## Managing the Fever

A fever can't always be detected by feeling your child's forehead. It's usually necessary to take his temperature as well. Although there are numerous thermometers on the market that measure temperature in different areas, parents should use rectal thermometers with their babies for the most accurate reading. See [How to Take a Child's Temperature](#) below for more information.

Once you've identified a fever, the most important things you can do is to improve your child's comfort and make sure they get enough fluid, so they do not get **dehydrated**. While you may instinctively want to bring your child to the doctor's office, it may not be necessary, especially if the child seems fine once their discomfort is treated.

## Keeping Fever at Bay

Although not every fever needs to be treated, there are some things you can do to help make your child more comfortable.

- Giving a child **acetaminophen** or **ibuprofen** will usually reduce a fever. It is important to make sure you give **the right dose** to your child.
- If your child is under two years of age, contact your pediatrician or pharmacist for the correct dose. For older children, follow the recommended dose on the label.
- Do not overdress your child. Other practices to reduce fevers such as an alcohol bath, ice packs, etc. are no longer recommended and can actually have adverse effects on your child.
- A fever will also cause a child to lose fluids more quickly, so offer plenty of **fluids to avoid dehydration**. Signs of dehydration include crying without tears, a dry mouth, and fewer wet diapers.
- Keep your digital thermometer ready and accessible so you don't have to search for it once your child is ill.
- Have children's acetaminophen or ibuprofen **on hand**.
- Make sure your pediatrician's phone number is handy.

## 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 signs of dehydration, such as a dry mouth, sunken soft spot or significantly fewer wet diapers and is not able to take in fluids
- Has immune system problems, such as sickle cell disease or cancer, or is taking steroids
- Has had a **seizure**
- Is younger than 3 months (12 weeks) and has a temperature of 100.4°F (38.0°C) or higher
- Fever rises above 104°F (40°C) repeatedly for a child of any age

Also call your child's doctor if:

- Your child still "acts sick" once his fever is brought down.
- Your child seems to be getting worse.
- The fever persists for more than 24 hours in a child younger than 2 years.
- The fever persists for more than 3 days (72 hours) in a child 2 years of age or older

## How to Take a Child's Temperature

### Taking Your Child's Temperature

While you often can tell if your child is warmer than usual by feeling his forehead, only a thermometer can tell how high the **temperature** is. Even if your child feels warmer than usual, you do not necessarily need to check this temperature unless he has other signs of illness. Always use a digital thermometer to check your child's temperature (see "Types of digital thermometers" chart below for more information, including guidelines on what type of thermometer to use by age). 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 and poisoning.

Note: Temperature readings may be affected by how the temperature is measured and other factors. Your child's temperature and other signs of illness will help your doctor recommend treatment that is best for your child.

### Types of Digital Thermometers

The following are 3 types of digital thermometers. While other methods for taking your child's temperature are available, such as pacifier thermometers or fever strips, they are not recommended at this time. Ask your child's doctor for advice.

Type	How it works	Where to take temperature	Age	Notes
<p>Digital multiuse thermometer</p> 	<p>Reads body temperature when the sensor located on the tip of the thermometer touches that part of the body.</p>	<p>Can be used rectally (in the bottom) , orally (mouth) , or axillary (armpit) .</p>	<p>Rectal or Axillary : Birth to 3 years  Oral: 5 years and older</p>	<p>Least reliable, technique, but useful for screening at any age</p> <p>100.4 °F fever guideline is based on taking rectal reading.</p> <p>Label thermometer "oral" or "rectal". Don't use the same thermometer in both places.</p> <p>Taking an axillary temperature is less reliable, but can be used as a screening tool</p>
<p>Temporal artery</p> 	<p>Reads the infrared heat waves released by the temporal artery, which runs across the forehead just below the skin.</p>	<p>On the side of the forehead</p>	<p>Before 3 months, better as a screening device than armpit temperatures</p>	<p>May be reliable in newborns and infants younger than 3 months according to new research.</p>
<p>Tympanic</p> 	<p>Reads the infrared heat waves released by the eardrum</p>	<p>In the ear</p>	<p>6 months and older</p>	<p>Not reliable for babies younger than 6 months.</p> <p>When used in older children it needs to be placed correctly in your child's ear canal to be accurate.</p> <p>Too much earwax can cause the reading to be incorrect</p>

## Rectal temperature

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.
- With the other hand, turn the thermometer on and insert it 1/2 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



Adapted From: [healthychildren.org](http://healthychildren.org)