



Fever in children

Fever (a high temperature) is common in children. Fever is a normal response to many illnesses, the most common being an infection in the body. Fever itself is usually not harmful – in fact, it helps the body's immune system fight off infection.

While fevers can be concerning for parents, doctors will usually be more concerned about what is causing the fever, and not what the child's temperature is. It is more important for you to monitor any symptoms of the underlying illness, rather than the fever itself.

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Signs and symptoms of fever

Your child has a fever when their temperature reads above 38°C on a thermometer.

Your child may also be:

- unwell and hot to touch
- irritable or crying
- more sleepy than usual
- vomiting or refusing to drink
- shivering
- in pain.

If your baby is under three months and has a fever above 38°C, then you should see a doctor, even if they have no other symptoms.

Taking your child's temperature

There are a number of ways you can take a child's temperature. Each method measures your child's temperature in a different way, and the results can vary depending on the type of thermometer you use. Different methods include:

- infrared forehead thermometer
- under the arm or under the tongue with a digital, mercury or alcohol thermometer
- ear (tympanic) thermometer
- plastic tape thermometers used on the forehead (these are not recommended as they are not reliable).

Some thermometers are more suitable for particular age groups so you should always read and follow the manufacturer's directions to get an accurate reading. You can also ask your Maternal and Child Health Nurse, GP or pharmacist to show you how to use your thermometer. Do this before you need it.

Febrile convulsions

Some children can have convulsions (a 'fit' or seizure) when they have a fever. These are called febrile convulsions. Your child may have a febrile convulsion if their temperature goes up suddenly. Sometimes, a convulsion happens when parents don't actually know their child has a fever. Febrile convulsions are not common and do not usually cause any long term health effects. See our fact sheet [Febrile convulsions \(www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Febrile_Convulsions\)](http://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Febrile_Convulsions).

Care at home

The infection that leads to a fever is often caused by a virus, and sometimes by bacteria. Only bacterial infections are treated with antibiotics. Viral infections are far more common and do not need antibiotics, because antibiotics do not cure viruses.

Lowering your child's fever will not help treat the underlying illness more quickly. The only advantage of lowering a fever is improving your child's comfort.

If your child seems well and is happy, there is no need to treat a fever. If your child is miserable, there are things you can do to help them to feel more comfortable:

- Give your child frequent small drinks. Many children refuse to eat when they have a fever. This is not a problem, as long as they stay hydrated.
- Give extra breastfeeds, formula bottles or cooled boiled water to babies under six months old.
- Give your child paracetamol and/or ibuprofen if the fever is making them miserable or they have other symptoms, such as a sore throat. Carefully follow the dosage instructions on the packaging. Do not give ibuprofen to babies under three months old or to any child who is dehydrated. Never give aspirin to children. See our fact sheet [Pain relief for children](https://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Pain_relief_for_children/) (https://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Pain_relief_for_children/).
- Try wiping your child's forehead with a sponge or facewisher soaked in slightly warm water to help cool them down. It's important they don't become too cold or uncomfortable when you do this. Cold baths or showers are **not recommended**.
- Dress your child in enough clothing so that they are not too hot or cold. If your child is shivering, add another layer of clothing or a blanket until they stop.

Watch your child for signs that their illness is getting worse.

When to see a doctor

If your baby is under three months and has a fever above 38°C, or if your child is immunocompromised (has a weakened immune system) due to a medical condition or medical treatment and has a fever above 38°C, then you should see a GP, even if they have no other symptoms.

For all other children, take them to see a GP if their temperature is above 38°C and they have any of the following symptoms:

- a stiff neck or light is hurting their eyes
- vomiting and refusing to drink much
- a rash
- more sleepy than usual
- problems with breathing
- pain that doesn't get better with pain relief medication.

Also take your child to a GP if they:

- have a fever above 40°C, but show no other symptoms
- have had any fever for more than two days
- seem to be getting more unwell
- have had a febrile convulsion.

Key points to remember

- Fevers are common in children.
- A fever is when a child's temperature rises above 38°C.
- If your child seems well and is happy, there is no need to treat a fever.
- **If your child is under three months and has a fever above 38°C, take them to the doctor, even if they have no other symptoms.**
- Take your child to the doctor if they seem to be getting worse or their temperature is over 40°C.

For more information

- Kids Health Info fact sheet: [Febrile convulsions \(www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Febrile_Convulsions/\)](https://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Febrile_Convulsions/).
- Kids Health Info fact sheet: [Pain relief for children – paracetamol and ibuprofen \(https://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Pain_relief_for_children/\)](https://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Pain_relief_for_children/).
- Kids Health Info fact sheet: [Dehydration \(https://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Dehydration/\)](https://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Dehydration/).

- Raising Children's Network: [Taking your child's temperature](http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/taking_your_childs_temperature.html) (http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/taking_your_childs_temperature.html).
- See your GP or Maternal and Child Health Nurse.

Common questions our doctors are asked

Should I be worried about my child's fever?

Doctors do not focus on fever in a child. They are more concerned about how your child looks and feels – if your child is not drinking, is lethargic and not themselves, or they have had a persistent fever for two or more days, that is when a doctor may try to work out what is causing the fever, and may require a blood test or urine sample.

Can teething cause a fever?

Children who are teething may have a fever of up to 38°C. However, a temperature greater than 38°C should never just be attributed to teething. It is more likely that an infection is present.

Even after pain relief, my child has a fever. Should I be worried?

Not if your child is feeling better and their other symptoms have improved. Paracetamol and ibuprofen may not make the fever go away, but the aim is to make your child feel better. If the fever has lasted for more than two days without getting better, see a doctor.

When I feel sick, my GP advises me to take aspirin. Can I also use this for my child?

Aspirin should never be given to a child to help manage their fever. It can lead to a dangerous condition called Reye syndrome. It should only be given when specifically recommended by a doctor. Paracetamol or ibuprofen can be used instead.

Developed by The Royal Children's Hospital General Medicine and Emergency departments, and Centre for Community Child Health. We acknowledge the input of RCH consumers and carers.

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