Fever in children

**What is fever?**
Fever is an elevated temperature. All children will have a fever at some time. It is one of the most common reasons for children to see a doctor and often causes parents to worry.

Normal body temperature may vary quite considerably according to the age of the child and the time of day but may be up to 38°C.

**What causes fever in children?**
More than 90 per cent of fevers in children are caused by viral infections and antibiotics can’t help. Bacterial infections also cause fever.

The degree of the temperature and response to medicine (e.g. paracetamol, ibuprofen) do not help to tell the difference between viral or bacterial infections. Your doctor may perform some tests to look for the bacteria or viruses causing the fever.

**Can a fever cause problems?**
A fever itself does not hurt a child—it just shows that the child’s immune system (defenses) is fighting an infection. In many instances the fever is probably helpful and may shorten the duration of the illness.

There is no need to give paracetamol or ibuprofen regularly to try to control the fever.

Around 1 in 25 children under five will have seizures with fever (febrile convulsions). Febrile convulsions are scary for parents but the seizures are usually brief and do no harm to the child. If your child has a seizure, it is important to see a doctor to determine if any investigation or treatment is required.

Only in an extremely rare situation, when there is fever over 42°C, can long term harm occur. It is extremely rare for this to happen as a consequence of childhood infections.

**Signs and symptoms**
- A high temperature
- Child may be feeling miserable
- Loss of body fluid more quickly than usual

**When should you seek medical help?**
You should see a doctor if your child:
- is less than three months of age
- looks very sick, is poorly responsive, is uninterested in his or her surroundings, is very sluggish, won’t feed from the breast or bottle
- cries constantly
- is difficult to awaken
- has a stiff neck
- has purple spots on their skin
- is working hard to breathe
- is drooling excessively or having great difficulty swallowing
- has an earache or sore throat
- has a limp or will not use an arm or leg
- has severe abdominal pain
- is having painful urination or difficulty urinating
- has any redness or swelling on his or her body
- has a seizure (fit, convulsion).

Parents and carers know their children best, so if you are concerned about your child you should contact your doctor or hospital as soon as possible.
**Things you can do at home**

- Remember fever is rarely harmful so it is best to treat the discomfort rather than the fever itself:
  - Ensure your child drinks plenty of fluid
  - Avoid overdressing your child
  - Avoid sponging and cold baths that make your child shiver

- If your child is uncomfortable and irritable (with or without a temperature), the following medications can be given in the recommended doses:
  - Children’s paracetamol (Panadol, Dymadon)
  - Children’s ibuprofen (Nurofen)

**Important facts about fever in children**

- Fever is common in children and is usually caused by viral infections
- Fever itself rarely causes harm and may in fact help fight the infection
- Children with fever need to take in more fluid than usual
- Paracetamol or ibuprofen may help to make your child feel better when they are unwell with a high fever
- If your child looks sick enough to concern you, take them to see a doctor, particularly if they have any of the signs mentioned previously.

**Contact us**

Lady Cilento Children’s Hospital
501 Stanley Street, South Brisbane
T 07 3068 1111 (hospital switchboard)

In an emergency, always contact 000 for immediate assistance.

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All information contained in this sheet has been supplied by qualified professionals as a guideline for care only. Seek medical advice, as appropriate, for concerns regarding your child’s health.