

Febrile convulsion

What is a febrile convulsion?

A febrile convulsion is a seizure or fit that occurs with a fever (temperature above 38°C). Febrile convulsions usually occur in children between the ages of six months and six years. Approximately one in 30 children will experience a febrile convulsion.

It is a very scary experience for most parents, but it does not harm your child. Febrile convulsions do not cause brain damage and will not affect your child's development.

Signs and symptoms

- body stiffening
- sharp jerking movements of arms and legs
- head arching back
- eyes rolling back

A child who is having a febrile convulsion will not respond to you. Convulsions may last for several minutes (rarely up to 15 minutes or longer). The child is usually drowsy afterwards.

What causes it?

It is not clear why febrile convulsions happen. Convulsions are caused by a spike or rapid firing of the neurons (nerves) within the brain. Febrile convulsions often occur during the early stages of an illness when there is a rapid rise in body temperature. Your child may have a febrile convulsion before you even realise they are sick.

The fever may be caused by any infection including a viral upper respiratory infection (cold or flu), ear infection, pneumonia, bacterial diarrhoea and/or, more rarely, an infection in the blood stream (sepsis) or infection around the brain (meningitis).

A child who has a febrile convulsion has no more chance of having a serious infection than any other child with a fever.

Does my child have epilepsy?

Having a febrile convulsion does not mean that your child has epilepsy. Children with epilepsy have convulsions when they do not have a fever.

Some children may have a second (or third) febrile convulsion when they are sick with a fever at another time. These children are still not likely to develop epilepsy.

Care during a convulsion

If you witness your child having a febrile convulsion, there is nothing you can do to stop it. However, you should:

- make the area safe by shifting your child from the edge of a bed and moving any sharp objects nearby that could injure them
- call for an ambulance (000)
- roll your child onto their side when the convulsion is over

The care of a person having a convulsion is taught in a First Aid course. Completing a First Aid course may help you feel more comfortable with knowing what to do if you witness another convulsion in the future.

Care after a febrile convulsion

Your child may be 'out of sorts' for a day or so but this will pass. No medications are required except Paracetamol or Ibuprofen as you would usually use them. Sometimes children who have febrile convulsions, particularly long ones, will need to be observed in hospital.

In most cases, no follow-up appointment is required after a first febrile convulsion.



Prevention

It is not possible to prevent febrile convulsions as they are often the first sign of illness.

However, here are some tips to manage a fever:

- Children's paracetamol (Panadol) or Ibuprofen (Nurofen) may help reduce temperature and make your child feel a little better.
- Avoid overdressing your child.
- Avoid cold baths that may cool your child down too rapidly.
- Make sure your child drinks plenty of fluids.

In most cases, medications that prevent convulsions are not needed.

When should I see a doctor?

Call **000** immediately if your child is having a convulsion.

All children should be seen by a doctor after having a convulsion (either a GP or at the Emergency Department of nearest hospital).

The doctor will check your child's temperature and look for the cause of the fever. This may involve some tests, depending on your child's symptoms.

For non-urgent medical advice, call 13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) to speak to a registered nurse 24 hours a day, seven days a week for the cost of a local call.

Things to remember

- One in 30 children will experience a febrile convulsion at some time, usually before six years of age.
- Febrile convulsions are caused by a rapid change in body temperature associated with infection.
- Febrile convulsions do not cause any damage to a child's brains or affect development.
- If you witness a child having a febrile convulsion, you should make the area safe by moving the child from the edge of the bed or shifting nearby objects that may injure them.
- Call an ambulance if your child is having a convulsion.
- A child who has a febrile convulsion has no more chance of having a serious infection than any other child with a fever.

Further information

See the *Fever* fact sheet on the Children's Health Queensland Hospital and Health Service website www.childrens.health.qld.gov.au

Search for "CHQ fact sheet fever" or scan the QR code with the camera on your phone

