

# Fever

## What is a fever?

A fever is a high temperature. A child's normal body temperature may vary depending on their age and the time of day. A child with a temperature above 38°C has a fever.

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. However, it is extremely rare for a fever to cause long-term harm.

## What causes it?

More than 90 percent of fevers in children are caused by viral infections. Less commonly, a fever can be due to a bacterial infection.

The degree of the temperature and response to medicine (e.g. Paracetamol, Ibuprofen) do not help to tell the difference between a viral or bacterial infection.

Depending on your child's other symptoms, your doctor may perform some tests to look for the bacteria or virus causing the fever.

## Will it harm my child?

A fever shows that the child's immune system (defence) is fighting an infection. The fever itself will not hurt a child but will often help your child get better faster. Around 1 in 30 children (usually in children aged less than six years) will have a fit (also known as a seizure or convulsion) with a fever. This is known as a febrile convulsion. See the factsheet on febrile convulsions for more information.

## How is it measured?

A child's temperature is measured using a thermometer. Placing the thermometer under the arm pit is the most reliable way of taking a baby's temperature. Children over six months of age can also have their temperature measured using a thermometer in the ear.

Infrared sensors beamed at the skin or stick on patches are not recommended as they do not measure temperature accurately.

## What is the treatment?

If your child is uncomfortable or irritable, you can give them children's Paracetamol (Panadol, Dymadon) or Ibuprofen (Nurofen). Follow the instructions on the bottle for the right dose for your child. Do not give more than the recommended number of doses in a day. There is no need to give Paracetamol or Ibuprofen regularly to control a fever.

Antibiotics are rarely needed because most fevers in children are caused by viruses.

## Care at home

Remember a 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 as these can make your child shiver.



## When should I see a doctor?

**Parents and carers know their children best. If you are concerned, you should see a doctor as soon as possible. If your child has been seen by a doctor and you have concerns about their health before your next appointment, visit your doctor sooner.**

You should see a doctor if your child has a fever and:

- is less than three months of age
- looks very sick, is not responding to you or is not interested in their surroundings
- won't feed from the breast or bottle
- cries constantly and is hard to settle
- is difficult to wake up
- has a stiff neck
- purple spots on their skin
- is working hard to breathe
- is drooling excessively or having difficulty swallowing
- a limp or will not use an arm or leg
- severe abdominal pain
- is having painful urination or problems urinating
- any redness or swelling on his/her body
- a fit (seizure, convulsion)

**In an emergency, always call 000 immediately.** Otherwise, contact your local doctor or visit the emergency department of your nearest hospital. 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

- A fever is common in children and
- A fever itself rarely causes harm and can help fight an 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.**

## Further information

A fact sheet on febrile convulsions can be found on the Children's Health Queensland Hospital and Health Service website [www.childrens.health.qld.gov.au/](http://www.childrens.health.qld.gov.au/)

Search for "CHQ fact sheet febrile convulsion" or scan the code below with the camera on your phone:

