

FEVER (THE BASICS)

Patient information: Fever in children (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

What is a fever? — A fever is a rise in body temperature that goes above a certain level. The level that is considered a fever depends on how you take the temperature. Here are the values that are considered a fever:

- Rectal temperature above 100.4°F (38°C)
- Oral (mouth) temperature above 100°F (37.8°C)
- Armpit temperature above 99°F (37.2°C)
- Ear temperature above 100.4°F (38°C) in rectal mode or 99.5°F (37.5°C) in oral mode
- Forehead temperature above 100.4°F (38°C)

Armpit, ear, and forehead temperatures are easier to measure than rectal or oral temperatures, but they are not as accurate. Even so, the height of the temperature is less important than how sick your child seems to you. If you think your child has a fever, and he or she seems sick, your doctor or nurse might want you to double-check the temperature with an oral or rectal reading.

What is the best way to take my child's temperature? — The most accurate way is to take a rectal temperature.

Oral temperatures are also reliable when done in children who are least 4 years old. Here is the right way to take a temperature by mouth:

- Wait at least 30 minutes after your child has drunk or eaten anything hot or cold.
- Wash the thermometer with cool water and soap. Then rinse it.
- Place the tip of the thermometer under your child's tongue toward the back. Ask your child to hold the thermometer with his or her lips, not teeth.
- Have your child keep his or her lips sealed around the thermometer. A glass thermometer takes about 3 minutes to work. Most digital thermometers take less than 1 minute.

Armpit, ear, and forehead temperatures are not as accurate as rectal or oral temperatures.

What causes fever? — The most common cause of fever in children is infection. For example, children can get a fever if they have:

- A cold or the flu
- An airway infection, such as croup or bronchiolitis
- A stomach bug

In some cases, children get a fever after getting a vaccine.

Should I take my child to see a doctor or nurse? — You should take your child to a doctor or nurse if he or she is:

- Younger than 3 months and has a rectal temperature of 100.4°F (38°C) or higher. Your infant should see a doctor or nurse even if he or she looks normal or seems fine. Do not give fever medicines to an infant younger than 3 months until he or she has been seen by a doctor or nurse.
- Between 3 and 36 months and has a rectal temperature of 100.4°F (38°C) or higher for more than 3 days. Go right away if your child seems sick or is fussy, clingy, or refuses to drink fluids.
- Between 3 and 36 months old and has a rectal temperature of 102°F (38.9°C) or higher.

Children of any age should also see a doctor or nurse if they have:

- Oral, rectal, ear, or forehead temperature of 104°F (40°C) or higher
- Armpit temperature of 103°F (39.4°C) or higher
- A seizure caused by a fever
- Fevers that keep coming back (even if they last only a few hours)
- A fever as well as an ongoing medical problem, such as heart disease, cancer, lupus, or sickle cell anemia
- A fever as well as a new skin rash

What can I do to help my child feel better? — You can:

- Offer your child lots of fluids to drink. Call the doctor or nurse if your child won't or can't drink fluids for more than a few hours.
- Encourage your child to rest as much as he or she wants. But don't force your child to sleep or rest. (Your child can go back to school or regular activities after he or she has had a normal temperature for 24 hours.)

Some parents give their children sponge baths to cool them down, but that is not usually necessary. It is never a good idea to cool a child down with any kind of alcohol.

How are fevers treated? — That depends on what is causing the fever. Many children do not need treatment. Those who do might need:

- Antibiotics to fight the infection causing the fever. But antibiotics work only on infections caused by bacteria, not on infections caused by viruses. For example, antibiotics will NOT work on a cold.
- Medicines, such as [acetaminophen](#) (sample brand name: Tylenol) or [ibuprofen](#) (sample brand names: Advil, Motrin) can help bring down a fever. But these medicines are not always necessary. For instance, a child older than 3 months who has a temperature of less than 102°F (38.9°C), and who is otherwise healthy and acting normally, does not need treatment.

If you do not know how best to handle your child's fever, call his or her nurse or doctor.

NEVER give [aspirin](#) to a child younger than 18 years old. Aspirin can cause a dangerous condition called Reye syndrome.