

Childcare

and Children's Health

AN INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARENTS



Fever in Babies and Children

What is normal temperature and what is a fever?

A normal body temperature for a child is about 37°C, but will vary slightly (by about 1°C) according to the age of the child and the time of day, with body temperature being a bit lower in the morning and higher at night. Fever is when the temperature remains at 38°C or above.

Fever is common in children, but it is rarely harmful. Fever is not an illness: it is a symptom, or sign, of an underlying problem. The most common cause of a fever is an infection, which can be either viral or bacterial.

Taking a child's temperature

Taking a baby's or child's temperature accurately can be difficult. The best advice is to observe and assess the overall condition of the child, rather than to make a judgment based solely on temperature.

Do not use an old style mercury thermometer as there is a risk of breaking the glass and releasing the highly toxic mercury.

Is medication or medical help needed?

As a higher temperature is the body's way of dealing with an infection, medication to reduce the temperature (eg. paracetamol or ibuprofen) is not normally advised, unless the child is very uncomfortable.

Do not give aspirin to infants or children

You do not need to contact a doctor if the child generally looks well and is:

- alert
- still interested in playing (or other normal activities)
- drinking well and urinating normally
- has good (and even) skin colour

Your child can be made more comfortable in light, loose clothing and being given clear fluids (water or diluted juice). Sponging with cool water or placing a child in front of a fan is not advised as it may make the child more uncomfortable.

See a doctor for any of the following:

- difficulty in breathing or rapid breathing
- rash or blotchy patches on skin
- vomiting
- cramps
- drowsy/unresponsive/floppy
- stiff neck
- persistent headache
- continuing diarrhoea
- affected by (or sensitive to) bright lights

Fever in infants may indicate a more serious underlying problem. A baby of 3 months or younger, with a fever, should be seen urgently by a doctor. Seek medical advice if the baby is younger than 12 months.

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SUPPORTED BY AN
EDUCATIONAL GRANT FROM



SUPPORTED BY THE
NATIONAL CHILDCARE
ACCREDITATION COUNCIL



SUPPORTED BY



Australian Government
Department of Families,
Community Services and
Indigenous Affairs