

Caring for Your Child's Fever

What is a fever and why does it happen?

- A fever is the body's natural way to fight infections.
- A fever means that the body temperature is higher than normal.
- How high your child's temperature is does not tell you how serious their illness is. How your child looks or acts is more important than how high their fever is.
- Causes of fevers may include:
 - Viral infections such as influenza and parvovirus ('fifth disease').
 - Bacterial infections such as urinary tract infections and pneumonia.
 - Immunizations. Fevers may occur 1 to 14 days after immunization, depending on the vaccines your child received.

What is a child's normal body temperature?

A child has the same body temperature range as an adult:

- 35.5°C – 37.5°C (95.9°F – 99.5°F) when taken by mouth.
- 36.5°C – 37.5°C (97.7°F – 99.5°F) when taken under an armpit.
- 35.8°C - 37.9°C (96.4°F - 99.5°F) when taken in the ear.
- 36.6°C – 38°C (97.9°F – 100.4°F) when taken rectally (in the bum).

How can I tell if my child has a fever?

- Accurate temperature taking is important to check if your child has a fever. Electronic digital thermometers are recommended for use in children. Follow the instructions on the package for cleaning the thermometer before and after use.

By armpit (for newborns and young children):

- Place the tip of the thermometer in the centre of your child's armpit making sure it touches bare skin on all sides.
- Make sure your child's arm is tucked tightly against their body.
- When the thermometer beeps, remove it and read the temperature.

By mouth (for children older than 5 years):

- Wait 20 minutes after your child has a hot or cold drink or food before taking their temperature by mouth.
- Place the thermometer tip under their tongue.
- Tell the child to hold the thermometer with their lips. Remind them not to bite down.
- When the thermometer beeps, remove it and read the temperature.

By ear (for children 2 years and older):

- Ear (tympanic) thermometers are quick to use but they can give temperature readings that are too low, even when the manufacturer directions are followed. If an ear thermometer does not show a fever but your child feels warm and seems unwell, take another temperature reading by armpit or by mouth.
- Use a clean probe tip each time, and follow the manufacturer's instructions carefully.
- Gently pull the ear back to help straighten the ear canal, and make a clear path inside the ear.
- Gently insert the thermometer until the ear opening is fully sealed off.
- When the thermometer is ready, remove it from the ear and read the temperature.

Note:

- Rectal (bum) temperatures are the most accurate way to measure the body temperature, however this method is not recommended as there is a chance of injury if not done safely.
- A non-contact infrared (forehead) thermometer will give a temperature reading quickly and reduce the risk of spreading disease; however head coverings, sweat, direct sunlight, cold air and positioning on forehead may lead to an inaccurate reading.
- Forehead strips, pacifier (soother) and disposable thermometers are not accurate and are not recommended.
- Do not use a glass mercury thermometer as it can cause poisoning if it breaks.

What can I do if my child has a fever?

- **Encourage your infant to breastfeed or formula feed as often as possible** to prevent dehydration (infants do not need to be given additional water or other fluids).
- **Encourage your child to drink** water or diluted juice or eat popsicles, gelatin or ice chips, and watch for signs of dehydration (e.g., their pee is dark colored or they are thirstier than usual).
- To keep your child comfortable, dress your child lightly and cover them with a light blanket or sheet to prevent them from being too cold and shivering, which makes more body heat and may cause their temperature to rise again.

What about medications?

- Do not give fever medications before **or** at the time of immunization because it can decrease the body's immune response to vaccines. Only treat their fever (at least 6 to 8 hours after immunization) **if** your child is uncomfortable, refusing fluids and not sleeping.
- **If your child is otherwise healthy and acting normal, it is not necessary to treat their fever.**
- Carefully read and follow the product specific dosage instructions on the medicine bottle or package. If you are unsure, speak to your pharmacist, doctor, or nurse practitioner who can recommend a safe medication dose for your child.
- **Always check your child's weight** so they receive the right dosage of medication.
- **Acetaminophen** (Tylenol®, Tempra®) or **Ibuprofen** (Advil®, Motrin®) can be used to treat children's fevers and pain.
- **Acetaminophen** can be given every 4-6 hours. **Do not give your child more than 5 doses in a 24 hour period.**
- For infants less than 3 months of age, check with a pharmacist, doctor or nurse practitioner for the correct dosage of Acetaminophen.
- **Do not give Ibuprofen to infants younger than 6 months** without speaking to your doctor or health care provider.
- Ibuprofen can be given to children over 6 months of age every 6-8 hours. **Do not give more than 4 doses in a 24 hour period.**
- **Acetaminophen and Ibuprofen may be present in other over-the-counter medications.** Overdoses of acetaminophen have been known to cause permanent liver damage and/or death in children and adults.
- **Do not use ASA (Aspirin®) to treat a child's fever due to the serious risk of Reye's syndrome** that can damage the liver and the brain.
- **Always keep medication out of the reach of children,** in case of accidental overdose contact **Poison Control Centre at 1-866-454-1212** for emergency treatment advice.

For more information, contact HealthLine at 811 (24 hours a day), your local public health office, pharmacist, physician or nurse practitioner.

When should my child see a health care provider about their fever?

Call HealthLine at 811 or take your child to a doctor, nurse practitioner or emergency room:

- When the fever lasts for **more than 3 days.**
- When the fever is **38°C (100.4°F) or higher in a child less than 3 months old.**
- **When a child regardless of age who has any fever and any of the following symptoms, even if the fever responds to fever medication treatment:**
 - Has a rash that looks like small bruises on their skin.
 - Has a seizure or convulsion ('a fit' or shaking) whether or not they have a fever.
 - Is lethargic (very weak), or difficult to wake up.
 - Seems confused or delirious.
 - Has problems breathing.
 - Their skin colour does not look right or becomes grey, pale or blue.
 - Has headaches, neck pain, and stiffness or is sensitive to light.
 - Is irritable, cries constantly and cannot be settled.
 - Does not use an arm or leg normally or refuses to stand up.
 - Has repeated vomiting and/or diarrhea even if they don't look like they are dehydrated.
 - Cries when going to the bathroom, or if their pee smells bad.

Resources:

HealthLine Online: [SK healthlineonline](https://www.healthlineonline.com)

Canadian Pediatric Society: www.caringforkids.cps.ca;

The Hospital for Sick Children: www.aboutkidshealth.ca

Moms and Kids Health Saskatchewan:

<https://momsandkidssask.saskhealthauthority.ca>

University of Saskatchewan MedSask:

<https://medsask.usask.ca/>