

## Fever - children

A fever happens when the body's temperature is higher than normal because of an infection. Normal body temperature is around 37°C. Fever is usually caused by a virus or bacteria. Fever is a way in which the body fights infection. It is not always dangerous and does not always indicate a serious illness.

### Signs and symptoms of fever

Fever causes an increase in the heart rate, breathing rate and blood circulation to the skin. This is how the body tries to reduce the heat caused by fever. The symptoms of fever can include:

- Feeling and/or looking unwell
- Feeling hot to touch
- Sweating or clammy skin
- Shivering
- Chattering teeth
- Flushed face.

### Using a thermometer

If you suspect that your child has a fever, you can use a thermometer to measure their temperature. Remember, though, that body temperature is better used as a guide than a reliable indicator of illness for babies and young children - a child might have a mild temperature according to the thermometer (slightly over 37°C), but may seem happy and healthy.

There are several types of reliable thermometers available, which come with instructions on how to use them. They are available from your chemist. If you are in doubt about which one to choose for your child, or have questions about how to use it, ask your pharmacist to explain.

### When to see your doctor

Trust your own instincts, but seek medical help if your child:

- Is aged six months or less
- Has a rash
- Has a fever of 40°C or more
- Is still feverish after a day or so, despite four-hourly doses of baby paracetamol
- Vomits or has persistent diarrhoea
- Refuses food or drink
- Cries inconsolably
- Seems listless, floppy or just looks ill
- Convulses or twitches
- Has trouble breathing
- Is in pain
- If you feel at all worried or concerned at any stage, consult with your doctor.

### Treatment for a fever

- Dress your child in light clothing.
- Give drinks of clear fluid (like water).
- Keep your child cool.

- Give paracetamol in the correct dose for the child's age (but not more than four doses in a 24-hour period). Do not give regular paracetamol medicine for more than 24 hours without seeking advice from your doctor.
- See your doctor if your child is three months or younger.
- **Don't give your child a cold bath.** Give a lukewarm bath or sponge. Cold water cools the skin but does not lower the body temperature.

## Fever can cause convulsions

A febrile convulsion is a fit or seizure that occurs in babies and children when they have a high fever, usually from an ear infection or a viral upper respiratory infection. The fit can last a few seconds or up to 15 minutes, and is followed by drowsiness.

Between one in 20 to 30 otherwise healthy children will have one or more febrile convulsions between the ages of six months and five years. A febrile convulsion is not epilepsy and does not cause brain damage. There is no way to predict who will be affected or when this will happen.

## Symptoms of febrile convulsion

The symptoms of febrile convulsion include:

- Loss of consciousness (black out). The child will fall if standing and may pass urine
- Twitching or jerking of arms and legs
- Breathing difficulty
- Foaming at the mouth
- Going pale or bluish in skin colour
- Eye rolling, so only the whites of their eyes are visible
- Your child may take 15 minutes to wake up properly afterwards. They may be irritable and appear not to recognise you.

## What to do if your child has a convulsion

Convulsions are rarely serious. If your child has a convulsion you should:

- Place your child on the floor and remove any objects they could knock against.
- Lie your child on their side, not on their back.
- Check that your child does not breathe in vomit.
- Don't force anything into your child's mouth.
- Don't shake, slap or try to restrain your child.
- Place your child on their side with their face turned to the floor once the fit has stopped.
- Note what time the fit started and stopped, so you can tell the doctor.
- Call an ambulance if the fit lasts more than five minutes – Call triple zero (000).
- Have your child checked by your local doctor or nearest hospital emergency department as soon as possible after the fit stops to find the cause of the fever.

## Heat stroke does not cause fever

Heat stroke is caused by exposure to excessive heat. It can cause extremely high body temperatures, but it is not called a fever because it is not caused by an infection, inflammation or other internal disease process. Heat stroke can be very dangerous. If you think a child in your care has heat stroke, see your doctor straight away.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your pharmacist
- Your local maternal and child health centre
- Your local hospital emergency or casualty department.
- NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- In an emergency, call triple zero (000)

## Things to remember

- Fever is common in children.
- Fever and febrile convulsions are usually not dangerous.
- Call an ambulance if the fit lasts longer than 5 minutes, as drugs may be needed to stop the fit.
- Fever does not always mean a child is seriously ill.
- See your doctor if you are concerned about your child's health.

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Better Health Channel

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