



Fever in infants

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Introduction

A fever is a temporary increase in body temperature and is a common symptom of illness. When a fever occurs, the immune system is launching an attack to remove the cause of the illness by raising the body's temperature (heat inactivates many pathogens). As adults, we have a tightly controlled thermostat to help regulate our body temperature. Because a newborn's temperature regulation system is immature, an unexplained fever is a cause for concern.

Causes of fevers in infants

- Viral infections – colds and flu are the most common causes, as is gastroenteritis.
- Bacterial infections such as urinary tract and ear infections.
- Fevers sometimes occur after some vaccinations – usually, the parents will be forewarned.
- Teething does not cause fevers. However, when babies are teething, they often chew on anything in reach, causing them to pick up infections that way.

How to measure an infant's temperature

Digital thermometers are widely available and the most accurate. Glass thermometers containing mercury are not recommended. Other types of thermometers, like plastic strip and pacifier thermometers are not as accurate as digital thermometers.

The temperature can be measured in the armpit for infants who cannot hold a thermometer under their tongue. For infants up to three months of age, it may be necessary to take the temperature rectally. Temperatures measured in the ear or on the forehead are less accurate than oral and rectally measured temperatures. Just feeling a child's forehead does not give an accurate indication of fever at all.

When to seek medical attention

The average child will get several viral or bacterial infections during childhood, which means several fevers. Most fevers are mild and pass in a day or two. There are, however, some circumstances when parents should seek medical attention.

- **If the child is less than 3 months old** – with a rectal temperature of 38 °C or greater. Babies older than 3 months with a temperature of 39 °C or higher or whose fever lasts 24 hours or longer.
- **Change in behaviour** – if the baby is unusually sleepy or floppy or even extremely irritable. If the baby shows signs of having difficulty moving any part of the body (like the neck).
- **If a rash accompanies the fever** – some viruses like measles and chickenpox and some bacterial infections like strep throat and cellulitis can cause rashes. These infections require medical attention. A dark rash that looks like a bruise and does not get paler when you press on it is a sign of a serious infection.
- **If the baby is dehydrated** – they are drinking much less than usual and urinating less than usual.
- **If the fever lasts longer than 2–3 days**

Treating a fever at home

In most cases, a child with a fever can be treated at home.

- **Medications** – Paracetamol and ibuprofen are the most effective way to treat fevers. *Paracetamol 120 mg/5 ml syrup* (2.5–5 ml) can be given 4-hourly to infants from 3 months – no more than four doses per 24-hour period should be given.
- *Ibuprofen 100 mg/5 ml syrup* can be given 6–8-hourly to infants from 6 months – no more than three doses per 24-hour period should be given. The dose is calculated using the infant's weight (5 mg/kg/dose).
- For infants younger than 3 months, consult a doctor first.
- *Aspirin* is not recommended in children under 18 years of age.
- **Adjust their clothing** – when the infant is overdressed, excess clothing traps body heat.
- **Increase fluids** – it is essential that an infant does not become dehydrated.

- **Sponging and lukewarm baths** – do not use ice or rubbing alcohol.
- **Rest** – it is unnecessary to wake a sleeping infant for a dose of medicine if the infant is sleeping comfortably.

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