

Self-Care Guide - Fever in Children

This fact sheet helps you to know what's 'normal' and what you can expect to happen if your child develops a fever. It also tells you when you should become concerned and seek advice from a health professional.

Useful facts

What is fever?

Fever is a raised body temperature above the normal daily variation, which usually suggests an underlying infection.

Fever is often 'normal'

Mild feverish illness is a normal part of childhood – a natural, healthy and harmless response to help the body fight infection.

Fever is common

Between around 3 to 7 out of 10 pre-school children develop at least one episode of fever every six to 14 months.

Common causes

Common causes of fever include the common cold, ear infections, stomach bugs (*gastroenteritis*), throat- and travel-related infections.

Serious causes

Severe infections, such as pneumonia or meningitis, are in *rare* cases the main cause of a fever.

Children under six months

Any child under six months of age with a fever should be assessed by a health professional.

What can I expect to happen?

Fever gets better by itself

In most cases, fever is due to a common and harmless illness that gets better by itself – and your child won't need antibiotics.

Duration

Fever should not last for longer than five days.

What can I do to help my child – now and in the future?

Check your child's temperature

In children aged between four weeks and five years, use either an electronic or chemical dot thermometer in your child's arm pit, or an infra-red tympanic thermometer in the ear canal.

If you haven't got a thermometer, use your judgement as to whether your child feels abnormally hot.

Clothing

Avoid over- or under-dressing your feverish child.

Heating and cooling

Keep your central heating down. Tepid sponging of children is no longer recommended.

Fluids

Offer your child regular fluids. If you're a breastfeeding mother, offer your child as many feeds as she/he will take.

Body checks

Check your child at night for signs of serious illness (see over).

Schooling/nursery

It is best to keep feverish children away from nursery or school while the fever persists.

Medication You can give either *paracetamol* or *ibuprofen* if your child is unwell or appears distressed. Neither should be given routinely just to reduce body temperature or with the aim of preventing fits. Do not give your child paracetamol and ibuprofen at the same time unless advised to do so by a health professional. If your child is still distressed before the next dose of one of these medicines is due, you can consider using the other.

When should I seek medical help?

Rarely, more serious medical problems may cause fever in children. Speak to your child's GP if your child's health gets worse or if you have concerns about looking after your child at home. Also seek medical advice straight away if you notice any of the following:

High fever

Usually defined as a body temperature over 38°C in children age 0-3 months or over 39°C in children age 3-6 months.

Vomiting

Your child vomits repeatedly, or brings up dark-green vomit.

Skin colour

Your child looks pale, ashen, mottled or blue.

Activity

Your child doesn't respond normally, wakes only with difficulty, is less active, doesn't smile, appears ill or cries in an unusual way.

Breathing Your child breathes much faster than usual. Your child's nostrils flare, and the skin between the ribs or the area just below the rib cage move abnormally during breaths. You notice abnormal grunting.

Hydration Your child doesn't eat or drink much and doesn't pass as much urine. Nappies stay dry, her or his mouth and eyes appear dry, or in babies, the soft spot at the top of the head appears sunken or bulges.

Duration

Your child's fever has persisted for five or more days.

Rash

You notice a new rash that doesn't fade on pressure (press a tumbler against the rash to see if it disappears).

Other signs

Your child can't walk for some reason and has developed a swelling or new lump in a limb or joint. Your child has a stiff neck, cold limbs or has had a fit. You notice any other unusual symptoms and signs that you can't explain.

Where can I find out more?

Check out the **NHS Choices** website (<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/feverchildren/Pages/Introduction.aspx>) for more information on how you can manage fever in children. Remember that your pharmacist can also help you with assessing your child's symptoms.