

Fever and pain in children

What is a fever?

Fever means the body temperature is higher than normal and is common in young children. Fevers in children are usually caused by a viral infection.

A fever is part of the immune system’s natural response to an infection. Although a high temperature may make a child feel uncomfortable, fever actually helps fight off infection and doesn’t necessarily mean your child is seriously ill.

How to take your child’s temperature

If your child seems unwell and feels hot to the touch you may want to measure their temperature. If you don’t have a thermometer, place your hand on the skin of your child’s back between the shoulder blades to see if they feel hotter than normal. Digital thermometers can be used in children of any age.

Children under 5 years – Use a digital thermometer under your child’s arm.

Older children – Use a digital thermometer in your child’s mouth under the side of the tongue. An electronic or infrared ear thermometer can be used in older children but are less accurate for young babies.



and playing as normal you do not need to do anything. If your child with a fever is unhappy, encourage them to rest and try some of these ideas to make them more comfortable:

Fluids – Encourage your child to drink plenty of fluids. Give fluids a little at a time and often. Breast milk is best for breastfed babies and small sips of water may be offered for older infants. Young children may be given ice blocks if they are not interested in drinking.

Clothing – Dress your child in lightweight clothing, such as a singlet and nappy or pants, and use lighter bed covers. Make sure the room is a normal temperature and avoid draughts or fans blowing on the child (these can cause shivering and may make the fever worse).

Cooling – Gently wipe your child’s face and body with a damp, lukewarm cloth. Do not use cold cloths as this may make your child shiver.

Comfort – Give them extra reassurance and cuddles.

Paracetamol or ibuprofen – These can be given to help reduce fever if your child is feeling miserable. Follow the dosage instructions on the bottle and do not give for more than two days without seeing your doctor. Do not give both types of medicine or alternate them.

Cold and flu medicines are not recommended for babies and children. Do not use aspirin to treat fever in a child under 18 years. There is a risk of a very serious condition called Reye’s syndrome.

Check – Check your child regularly overnight.

Stay home – Keep your child away from childcare or school while the fever persists.

TEMPERATURE RANGES AND POSSIBLE SYMPTOMS

Around 37°C	Normal	No signs or symptoms
38°C–38.9°C	Mild fever	Child may have flushed cheeks, be less active, feel warm to the touch
39°C–39.9°C	High fever	Child may have flushed cheeks, be less active, be less interested in food or drink, feel hot to the touch
40°C or higher	Very high fever	Child will have flushed cheeks, refuse food and drink, be very listless and feel very hot to the touch

Caring for a child with a fever

Most healthy children are able to tolerate fever well while being cared for at home. Fevers generally last only three or four days and a mild fever may not need any treatment. If your child has a fever but is coping well and eating, drinking

Tip: Reducing fever can make your child feel more comfortable but does not make them get better from the illness more quickly.

Febrile convulsions

Occasionally fever can trigger a “fit” in a small number of children, usually when they are between 6 months and 5 years of age. These episodes are called febrile convulsions and occur without warning. Febrile convulsions look very worrying but they are not considered dangerous and are very unlikely to cause any long-term problems. Do not use medicines such as paracetamol to “prevent” febrile convulsion.

What can you do?

- If possible, lay your child on their side in the recovery position.
- Prevent them from breathing in any vomit.
- When the fit has stopped, take your child to the doctor or Emergency Department to be checked.
- Call 111 if the fit doesn’t stop within 5 minutes, your child has trouble breathing, does not wake up or respond after the convulsion, or you are worried in any way.

Common causes of pain in young children

Infants and young children often experience discomfort from sore throats, earache and teething. Simple measures can be helpful such as encouraging your child to rest, offering regular fluids and, in the case of teething pain, a teething ring that has been cooled in the fridge. Consider offering pain relief with paracetamol (usually first-line) or ibuprofen if your child is feeling miserable.

You know your child best – if he or she seems unwell and you are concerned take them to your doctor for a check-up.

- In some cases an ear infection may need antibiotics.
- Most sore throats get better by themselves, but children with a persistent sore throat or sore throat accompanied by fever or other symptoms should be checked by a doctor, who may take a swab to check for an infection (“strep throat”). Left untreated, strep throat can lead to a serious illness called rheumatic fever in a small number of children.

Who is at risk of rheumatic fever?

Get a sore throat checked by a doctor straight away if:

- Your child has any two of the following: Maori or Pacific ethnicity; age ≥ 3 years; living in crowded circumstances; living in lower socioeconomic areas of the North Island.
- Your child, or someone in your family or household, has had rheumatic fever in the past

Call Healthline on 0800 611 116 if you are unsure what to do.

When to see your doctor

- Any baby under 3 months with a fever, even a mild one, should be taken to the doctor.
- Any baby aged 3–6 months with a fever of 39°C or higher should be taken to the doctor.
 - In older children, watch your child for other signs and symptoms of illness as well as looking at the number on the thermometer. Go to the doctor or Emergency Department if your child:
 - Has a temperature over 40°C
 - Has a sore or stiff neck or a headache
 - Has a skin rash and is complaining of pain such as tummy ache or earache
 - Is confused, more drowsy than usual or floppy. *Dial 111 if your child is unconscious or you can’t wake them properly*
 - Has difficulty breathing or is breathing differently than normal
 - Has persistent vomiting or bile-stained (greenish) vomit
 - Has a fit or seizure
 - Has had a fever for more than 5 days.

If your child seems unwell and you are concerned, take them to the doctor whether they have a fever or not. If your child has already seen a doctor but seems to be getting worse take them back for another appointment.

More information and support

Call Healthline on 0800 611 116 if your child is sick and you are unsure what to do.

Call PlunketLine on 0800 933 922 for help and support

In an emergency dial 111.

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