

Caring for a Child with Fever



Emergency Department

4480 Oak Street, Vancouver, BC V6H 3V4

604-875-2345 • 1-888-300-3088

www.bcchildrens.ca

Advice for Parents & Caregivers

About fever

Fever is a rise in body temperature. It is part of the body's normal effort to fight infection. Fever may, in fact, help a child to fight off disease. Everyone's temperature is higher in the late afternoon and lower in the early morning.

How will I know if my child has a fever?

A child with a fever may look flushed and feel hot to the touch. Your child may also be irritable or more sleepy than usual. If your child has these symptoms, you can check their temperature.

Use a thermometer to measure your child's temperature. There are many types of thermometers in drugstores. Please follow the instructions for the type of thermometer you have.

There are 2 ways to take a temperature with most thermometers:

1. **Underarm Temperature:** This is a safe, reliable way to take a child's temperature.

- Dry the child's armpit.
- Place the bulb end of the thermometer under your child's armpit. Hold it there by keeping your child's elbow close against his or her side until the thermometer beeps (or as per your thermometer's instructions).

Normal underarm temperature is 36.5 degrees Celsius (97.7 degrees Fahrenheit). A fever is an underarm temperature above 37.5 degrees Celsius (99.5 degrees Fahrenheit).

2. **Oral temperature** (in your child's mouth): Use this method if your child is older than 6 years old. Younger children may bite the thermometer.

- Place the tip of the thermometer under your child's tongue. The child should not bite the thermometer. Ask your child to hold it there with lips closed tight until the thermometer beeps (or as per your thermometer's instructions).

Normal oral temperature is 37 degrees Celsius (98.6 degrees Fahrenheit). A fever is any oral temperature above 38 degrees Celsius (100.4 degrees Fahrenheit).

Note: There is no need to take a rectal temperature (in your child's bottom) at home. The nurse will teach you how if this is best for your child.

What can I do to care for my child at home?

Most children with fevers can be cared for at home. One way the human body fights infection is to raise its temperature. **This is a normal process for your child's body.** You don't always need to bring the temperature right back to normal.

- Keep your child cool but not cold:
 - remove heavy clothing and sweaters
 - keep the room temperature below 22 degrees Celsius (70 degrees Fahrenheit)
 - use a fan or air conditioner if it is summer and the room is very warm. Do not blow cold air directly on to the child.
- Do not worry if your child will not eat solid foods. Offer Jell-O or popsicles.
- Encourage your child to drink plenty of fluids. If your child is not eating, give your child an electrolyte drink like Pedialyte® or Gatorade® instead of only water.
- Sponge or bathe your child in lukewarm water. Never use alcohol or cold water.
- If your child feels sick with chills or aches or is uncomfortable, offer your child a pain medicine.

There is no need to treat the fever if your child appears to not be bothered by it.

If you decide to give your child a pain medicine:

- Pick either acetaminophen (Tylenol®) or ibuprofen (Advil® or Motrin®). There is no need to alternate the two medicines. If your child

is not drinking well, choose acetaminophen (Tylenol®). Follow the directions on the label for the correct amount for your child's age and weight. If your child is 12 years or older, he or she can have adult acetaminophen or ibuprofen according to the directions on the label.

- Wait until your child's pain medicine wears off. Acetaminophen wears off after 4 hours. Ibuprofen wears off after 6 hours. Then, check if your child is still bothered by the fever before giving your child another dose.
- DO NOT give Aspirin products unless prescribed by the doctor. Check the labels or ask the pharmacist if you are unsure.
- If your child is vomiting, ask your pharmacist for a form of the medicine that can be given through your child's bottom. This is called a suppository.



Call your family doctor or come to the Emergency Department if:

- your child's fever lasts for more than 5 days
- your baby is younger than 3 months of age
- your child see or hears things that are not there or seems confused
- your child is getting worse rather than better (looks sicker, is more tired, and not interested in anything)
- your child has difficulty breathing.
- your child has a seizure. (Seizures can happen with a fever and these are usually harmless, but your child should be assessed by a doctor. You can read more about Seizures Associated with a Fever under 'S' at: <http://www.bcchildrens.ca/KidsTeensFam/A-ZPamphlets>)
- your child has pain or a sore, stiff neck.

How is fever diagnosed and treated by a doctor?

Treatment depends on the cause of the infection your child is fighting.

There are a few tests your child's doctor may use to see what infection your child is fighting:

- Taking a sample of mucous from your child's nose.
- Ordering a chest x-ray to see if there is an infection in your child's lungs.
- Taking blood tests to check blood cells, bacteria, or glucose levels.
- Taking a sample of urine.
 - Your child's doctor or nurse may place a thin tube into your child's penis or vagina to get urine straight from your child's bladder.
- Taking a lumbar puncture or spinal tap if your doctor thinks your child may have meningitis.
 - Your child's doctor or nurse will insert a needle in your child's lower back and take a sample of your child's spinal fluid.

Your child may cry during the tests but the tests will be over in minutes. These tests will help the doctor decide on how to best treat your child.

Viral infection: Antibiotics do not cure viruses and are not given for viral infections.

Bacterial infection: If your child's infection is caused by bacteria, they will be given an antibiotic medicine to take. Please follow the directions and take all of the antibiotics, because even when the fever goes away, bacteria are still in the body. Your child's fever will usually come down within 24 to 48 hours of starting antibiotics. It is very important to complete the course of antibiotics (usually 7 to 10 days).