

The Health Corner: What should I do when my child has a fever

Written by Betsy Blevins

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What is Fever?

Fever is a symptom--a sign that your child's body is fighting off an infection. Most fevers are caused by common things like colds, ear infections, and bronchitis. Fever is the body's way of fighting infections. If you think your child has a fever, you should take their temperature. Temperature readings are different depending on what part of the body you use (rectum, ear, mouth, etc). For example, your child has a fever if their temperature is above:

Rectal 100.4F (38.0C)

Oral (by mouth) 99.5F (37.5C)

Axillary (armpit) 98.6F (37.0C)

Tympanic (ear) 100.0F (37.8C)

There are many types of thermometers on the market. Some are more accurate than others. Also, cost and ease of use will vary. Your pharmacist can help you select the right thermometer for your child.

Why Do We Treat a Fever?

Fevers are usually not dangerous for most children and infants over the age of three months. Most fevers do not lead to brain damage or death. Although some children have seizures when

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they have a fever, medicines used to treat fever do not always prevent these seizures. The main reason we treat fevers is to keep your child comfortable so they will eat, drink, or sleep. If your child has a mild fever but is playing, drinking fluids, and generally acting well, there is no reason to treat the fever. Medicines used to treat fever do not make the fever or infection go away faster. Medicines used to treat fever may not make your child's temperature normal. However, you should call your doctor if your child has a fever and is less than three months old, if the fever has lasted more than 24 hours, or if your child is also vomiting.

What Medicines Are Used to Treat Fever?

The most commonly used medicines to treat fever are acetaminophen (Tylenol and others) and ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil, others). When used as recommended, acetaminophen and ibuprofen have few side effects and are quite safe. These medicines come in drops for infants, liquid ("elixir") for toddlers, and chewable tablets for older children. The infant drops are more concentrated than the liquid elixir for toddlers. Do not switch back and forth between different products or you may give your child too much or too little medicine. Always closely read the directions on the label. DO NOT give your child aspirin for their fever unless your doctor tells you to. Aspirin can cause serious side effects and Reye's syndrome. Other tips for the safe use of acetaminophen or ibuprofen include:

To avoid making mistakes, read the label before you open the bottle, after you measure a dose, and again before you give it.

It is important to use the medicine exactly as you are told. Do not give more or less medicine and do not give it more frequently than recommended.

Many allergy, cold, and flu medications contain acetaminophen or ibuprofen. Check with your pharmacist before combining medications.

When giving your child a liquid medication, do not use standard tableware tablespoons and teaspoons because they usually are not accurate. Instead, use a measuring device such as a syringe, dropper, dosing spoon, or medicine cup.

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Other Ways to Keep Your Child Comfortable

There are other ways to keep your child comfortable. These include:

If shivering, keep your child warm until the shivering stops. If not shivering, you can remove your child's warm clothes and encourage them to drink plenty of fluids.

Keep your child rested, quiet, and comfortable in a cool room.

Place a cool washcloth on your child's forehead or sponge them with lukewarm water. If sponge bathing, make sure the water doesn't get cold, and stop if your child starts to shiver.

Never use rubbing alcohol to cool your child's skin. It can be absorbed through the skin and harm your child.