

Fact Sheet

Fever



What is a fever?

A fever is when the body's temperature is higher than normal.

Humans usually have a body temperature within a very narrow range. Normally a child has a fever when their temperature, is over 37.5°C. (when taken by a thermometer in the mouth or under the arm).

A child with a fever often has a hot, flushed face. The forehead may feel hot. The child may feel hot, or sometimes even shivery. A child's hands and feet may feel cold, even when the rest of the child is hot. Children with fever are often miserable or tired.

Is fever good or bad?

Fever is the body's natural response to infection. Raising the body temperature helps the body to fight off the infection, so it is not always necessary to treat the fever.

However, children with fever often feel uncomfortable and unwell and using measures to bring down their temperature can help.

Fevers, especially if they are rapidly increasing, may occasionally bring about convulsions (fits) in children under five years old. These are not dangerous but they can be frightening. Keeping a child's temperature from getting too high may prevent fits. Although paracetamol and ibuprofen is widely used in children with fever, it is often not effective in reducing fever and does not reduce the incidence of febrile convulsions.

What causes fever?

The most common cause of a fever is infection. Infections of the upper respiratory tract, such as colds and flu, are very common, especially in preschool children. Young preschoolers can have five to ten infections each year. These

infections are caused by a virus and get better on their own without antibiotics.

Some infections, like ear infections and some throat infections, may be caused by bacteria. If your child has a bacterial infection, he or she will get better much quicker if antibiotics are prescribed by a doctor.

Fever may also be caused by other factors, such as prolonged exposure to the sun on a hot day.

When do you need to see a doctor?

You need to see a doctor if your child has a fever and:

- Your child is very young (six months or younger).
- Your child seems very sick.

You also need to see a doctor if your child:

- Has an earache.
- Has difficulty swallowing.
- Has fast breathing.
- Has a rash.
- Has vomiting.
- Has neck stiffness.
- Has bulging of the fontanelle (the soft spot on the head in babies).
- Is very sleepy or drowsy.

Older children who have a cold, but are not very sick, generally do not need to see a doctor with every fever.

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Managing a fever

Since a fever is the body's natural response to infection it is not always necessary to reduce a fever. However, if your child is very hot and uncomfortable, you can try these simple steps:

- Take off your child's clothes.
- Give medications to reduce fever, eg. Panadol or Nurofen. This medication should be given at the correct dose, so ask your chemist or doctor for the correct dose.
- Give your child plenty to drink; children with a fever need more fluids.
- Consult a doctor if the fever does not settle or your child is still sick.

Remember

- Most fevers are caused by viral infections.
- Make sure your child drinks plenty of fluids.
- Babies under six months with a high temperature should be seen by a doctor.
- See a doctor if your child seems very sick.

This fact sheet is for education purposes only.
Please consult with your doctor or other health professional
to make sure this information is right for your child.

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the
children's
hospital at Westmead

www.chw.edu.au

 **SYDNEY
CHILDREN'S
HOSPITAL
RANDWICK**

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