

Fever Management

Many different illnesses can cause a fever. The most common causes of fevers in children are minor infections, such as a cold or sore throat. Most fevers less than 102°F (39°C) do not need any treatment. Fever-reducing medicines may help your child feel better.

Never give aspirin for fever in young children. Call your doctor's office if your child has a fever lasting longer than 2 or 3 days, or if he or she is acting very ill, has a temperature of 104°F (40°C) or higher, or has a fever and is less than 2 to 3 months old.

What are fevers?

Fever is a higher than normal body temperature. Average body temperature is about 98.6° Fahrenheit (F) or 37.0° Celsius (C). Most doctors define a fever as a temperature of 100.4°F or 38.0°C when taken rectally. Many different illnesses can cause fevers. The most common cause is some type of infection—usually with a virus or bacteria. Fever may help your child's body fight the infection.

In a child over ages 3 months who isn't acting very ill, fevers up to 102°F (39°C) are usually nothing to worry about, especially if accompanied by other symptoms of a cold or other minor illness. It's usually not necessary to give medicines to lower the fever, unless you think it will make your child feel better. Use only acetaminophen (for example, Tylenol) or ibuprofen (for example, Advil).

- *Never give aspirin for fever in young children.* This can increase the chances of developing a serious illness called Reye's syndrome.

Fevers sometimes cause seizures (involuntary movements). These "febrile seizures" are usually not serious, but you should call our office if they occur.

When should fevers be checked by the doctor?

Call our office or see a doctor if any of the following occurs:

- Fever in a child who is acting very ill: not easily soothed, crying a lot, very tired or sleepy—more than expected than for just "being sick."
- Fever lasting 3 or more days.
- Very high temperature: 104°F (40°C) or higher.
- Fever in an infant less than 2 to 3 months old.
- Fever developing later in an illness; for example, your child has a cold for 4 or 5 days and then gets a fever.
- Seizures related to a fever.

Which fevers should be treated with medications?

Treatment with fever-reducing drugs does not affect how long your child will be sick. However, lowering your child's temperature may help to make him or her feel better.

You may give fever-reducing drugs in certain situations:

- If your child is uncomfortable or in pain. Fevers higher than 102°F (39°C) often make children uncomfortable, so it's reasonable to give drugs to bring the fever down.
- If your child is at risk of becoming dehydrated (not drinking enough liquids or losing fluids through vomiting or diarrhea). Fevers cause increased loss of water from the body (through evaporation).
- Children with certain diseases, such as heart disease or febrile seizures, may benefit from treatment to control fever.

What medications should I use?

If giving medications to lower your child's fever, use acetaminophen or ibuprofen. Both drugs can help reduce fever and make your child feel better. They are available in liquid, chewable, or pill form.

- Ibuprofen may be somewhat more effective and last longer than acetaminophen, but both work.
- Some doctors recommend alternating between doses of acetaminophen and ibuprofen or using them together for difficult-to-control fevers. However, it's not clear how much better this approach works.
- Acetaminophen can be used every 4 to 6 hours, at the dose recommended on the label (based on your child's weight). Ibuprofen can be given no more frequently than every 6 hours.
- Both acetaminophen and ibuprofen are relatively safe drugs:
 - Ibuprofen is more likely to cause inflammation of the stomach (gastritis) and abdominal pain. Rarely, it can affect the kidney.
 - Large overdoses of acetaminophen can cause liver damage, sometimes serious. Large overdoses of ibuprofen have less serious consequences.

Occasionally, lukewarm sponge baths can be helpful if your child's fever is hard to control, but these usually aren't necessary. There is never a reason to use rubbing alcohol to bring the fever down.

If the fever is still present after 2 to 3 days of treatment, see the doctor.