



Fever in children

Many children have five to 10 mild infections with fever each year. Breastfeeding gives infants some protection, but infections increase as soon as the child comes into contact with other children. For instance, when they start pre-school.

What is normal?

The average body temperature in the mouth is 37c. It is slightly lower in the mornings and higher at night. A mild rise occurs with hot baths, hot weather or exercise. A temperature of 38c or more is a significantly high fever.

The temperature may be measured in the mouth, under the arm or on the forehead using a strip thermometer.

What causes fever?

The viruses and bacteria that cause infection release substances called pyrogens. These act on the immune system and increase the normal body temperature.

Fever may be caused also by heat production that is greater than the body's ability to cool down. This could happen if a baby is overdressed on a very hot day.

Viruses are the major cause of fevers in children. Most of these cause a mild illness. The child may seem off-colour, a bit irritable and not want to eat or play as usual.

More serious infections are caused by more harmful viruses and less commonly, by bacterial infection.

Sometimes the cause of infection is obvious: a painful ear in middle ear infection, a rash in chickenpox or measles, or diarrhoea and vomiting in gastroenteritis. Sometimes it is not obvious, as in urinary tract infections, when a child may not feel pain passing urine as an adult would.

Treating the fever

- Take the temperature.
- Do not overdress.
- Give paracetamol every four hours if fever persists. Read the dosage carefully on the bottle as the dosage is calculated by age and varies by brand.
- Wash with tepid water (just warm) and let the water evaporate from the skin. Cold water causes shivering, which increases body heat.
- Encourage the child to drink but don't worry if they don't eat. A

healthy child will gain any weight they lose as soon as they recover.

Aspirin should not be given to children under 12 years unless prescribed by a doctor (eg. in cases of arthritis).

Remember, a sick child needs love, reassurance and care.

So when should I worry?

- A high fever of 40c or a fever which does not respond to the treatment suggested.
- Fever in a baby under six months.
- Inconsolable or high pitched crying.
- Refusal of all food and drink.
- Vomiting all fluids.
- A convulsion or twitching.
- Difficulty breathing.
- A child who is difficult to arouse or very listless.
- Pain in the head, neck, abdomen or ear.
- A child who looks sicker than they would with a simple infection.

Remember, if you are worried a visit to your GP is never wasted.

