

Fever — Understanding a Fever

A fever is a body temperature that is higher than normal. Your child's normal body temperature varies with his age, general health, activity level, the time of day and how much clothing he is wearing. Everyone's temperature tends to be lower early in the morning and higher between late afternoon and early evening. Body temperature also will be slightly higher with strenuous exercise.

Most pediatricians consider any thermometer reading above 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit (38 degrees Celsius) a sign of a fever. This number may vary depending on the method used for taking your child's temperature. If you call your pediatrician, say which method you used.

If your child has a fever, it is probably a sign that her body is fighting an infection. When your child becomes ill because of a virus or bacteria, her body may respond by increasing body temperature. It is important to remember that, except in the case of heat stroke, fever itself is not an illness — only a symptom of one. Fever itself also is not a sign that your child needs an antibiotic.

Many conditions, such as an ear infection, a common cold, the flu, a urinary tract infection or pneumonia, may cause a child to develop a fever. In some cases, medication, injury, poison or an extreme level of overactivity may produce a fever. An environment that is too hot may result in heat stroke, a potentially dangerous rise in body temperature. It is important to look for the cause of the fever.

Fevers are generally harmless and help your child fight infection. They can be considered a good sign that your child's immune system is working and the body is trying to rid itself of the infection.

If your child has a fever, her heart and breathing rates naturally will speed up. You may notice that your child feels warm. She may appear flushed or perspire more than usual. Her body also will require more fluids.

Some children feel fine when they have a fever. However, most will have symptoms of the illness that is causing the fever. Your child may have an earache, a sore throat, a rash or a stomachache. These signs can provide important clues as to the cause of your child's fever.

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