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news & views on wellness & health



What to do when your child has a fever

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The most frequent calls I get when I am on call as a family physician are parents concerned about their child who has a fever. The first thing I always ask is if they have actually taken the temperature with a thermometer or if it is a “tactile” fever because the child feels hot to the touch. Once we have established that there is a true fever; an elevation of the body temperature above normal (98.6 degrees F) then we can determine what may be causing this and what to be concerned about.

True fever:

Rectal temperature >100.4 degrees F (38.0 C) (Best method for child <6 months)

Oral temperature >99.5 degrees F (37.5 C)

Ear temperature >100.4 degrees F (38.0 C)

Axillary temperature >99 degrees F (37.2 C)

I remind parents that fever is not a disease, but is a symptom of an underlying illness or infection. Fever by itself is usually not harmful; it means that the body’s immune system is working. Most fevers are caused by viral illnesses such as common colds or the flu. They usually range from 101°F to 104°F and last for a few days. Fevers can also be caused by bacterial infections. Common bacterial infections in children include strep throat, ear infections, pneumonia, and bladder infections. Teething does not cause a fever. Sometimes children can get a low-grade fever after getting vaccinated.

In general, it is not the degree of the fever but how sick the child acts that matters. The illness is not likely to be serious if your child is still interested in playing, alert and smiling, eating and drinking well, has a normal skin color and looks well when the temperature comes down. The exception to this is that any infant under 3 months with a rectal temp of 100.4°F or greater should be evaluated medically as their immune system is immature and they have not been fully vaccinated yet and are therefore at higher risk for severe bacterial infections.

When should you be concerned? if your child is irritable, confused, lethargic (not easy to wake up), breathing quickly or having difficulty breathing, refuses to eat or drink, is not urinating or having pain with urination, has a severe headache or neck stiffness, is still ill-appearing even when the temperature is brought down, or the fever persists for more than 2-3 days, then you should call your child’s doctor or seek medical attention immediately. Also, if your child suffers from a chronic medical condition such as heart disease, sickle cell anemia, cancer or any condition that affects the immune system, you should seek medical attention.

What can you do about a fever? Treating the fever or bringing it down to a normal temperature will make your child feel better, although it will not speed up their recovery from the underlying illness. Encourage them to drink lots of fluids, including Pedialyte or Gatorade solutions which replace electrolytes that are lost through sweating, diarrhea or vomiting. Drinking fluids will help to prevent dehydration. Popsicles and iced drinks can help cool them down. Don’t bundle them up with extra clothing, but give a light blanket if they are shivering or have the chills. Usually if the fever is less than 102°F, medications aren’t needed.

What medications can be used to bring down the fever?

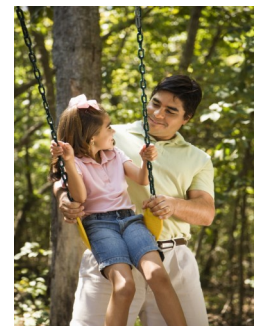
Children over 3 months of age can be given **Acetaminophen (Tylenol)** every 4 to 6 hours or **Ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin)** every 6 to 8 hours. Ibuprofen also has an anti-inflammatory effect which can help with pain and swelling. It should not be given on an empty stomach as it can cause stomach upset. Read the instructions on the medication bottles to make sure you are dosing correctly, which is based on weight. At Western Montana Clinic we have an excellent handout on dosing by weight for each formula of these medications, which can be very helpful. Remember that using a fever reducer will not help your child get better any faster but will probably make them feel better.

Avoid Aspirin for all children under 21 years. Aspirin taken during a viral illness such as a flu or the chicken pox can cause a severe illness called Reye’s syndrome.

If the fever is very high, 105°F or higher and is not responding to medication, or symptoms of heatstroke, delirium or seizure occur seek medical attention immediately.

Bottom Line: When should you call your child’s doctor or bring your child in to be seen?

- Any infant under 3 months with rectal temp 100.4°F or greater.
- Any child that looks or acts very sick, with lethargy, trouble breathing, dehydration, etc.
- When there is no obvious cause of the fever in a child under 3 years old.
- Fever of 105°F or higher.
- Persistent fever for more than 3 days.
- Fever which resolved for more than 24 hours but then returned.



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Carla Cox, PhD, RD

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Certified Diabetes Educator

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It may have been a busy, active summer, but the school year is far from slow and boring. If you have active kids in extra activities, you may find it hard to allocate time to fixing healthy meals, much less to think of snacks to send or bring while picking up children from school, dropping them off at practice and then picking them up again and taking them home for a late dinner.

Here are some suggestions that helped me get through those wonderful, but crazy days of active kids, and fueling them with what was best. Think ahead. Even if your head is swirling, and you just can't stay up 15 more minutes, it actually may save you hours if you stop and think.

Does your child need a snack?

If a child has had a good lunch and is headed to band practice and is hungry, a light snack is appropriate. String cheese and a pear, a small container of yogurt, apple slices with 2 tbsp of peanut butter are good options. Children that are not participating in sports should enjoy water instead of calorie-filled beverages such as sports drinks, juice and chocolate milk.

Is your child active in sports after school?

A larger snack is often appropriate to fuel muscles during the physical work of a game practice. Before practice, ½ to 1 whole peanut butter sandwich is a nice start. Six ounces of juice or 8 oz. of sports drink will help provide carbohydrates and rehydrate a thirsty child. Fresh fruit with cheese and crackers or chocolate milk and an apple are also good options.

These snacks can be used for bus trips as children travel to and from games. Don't hesitate to be an example of healthy eating for other kids and families! Suggest that the bus have a large cooler up front with healthy snacks for kids to choose, rather than stopping to pick up a variety of sugary, salty and fat-rich foods.

Eating healthy starts with you. If you provide healthy foods for your children, they can decide what and how much to eat. You will enhance their health in the long term AND provide nutrition that maximizes their performance.

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