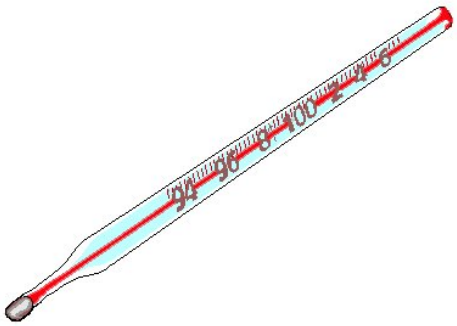
Fever, Taking a Temperature

A fever is a temperature of 1° or more above normal. Normal is 98.6° F (37° C). Mild or short-term fevers are common with minor infections. Fevers of 103° F (39.4° C) and above may mean you have a more serious infection. Contact your caregiver if you have a high fever or lower ones that persist. A normal temperature varies by person, age, time of day, and where on the body the temperature was taken. The average normal body temperature is 98.6° F (37° C).



Checking temperatures rectally or under the arm (*axillary*) is necessary in small children. This is because they are not able to hold a thermometer in their mouths. Axillary temperatures are about 1 degree lower than rectal temperatures. For babies less than 3 months old, start with an armpit (*axillary*) temperature. If it is higher than 99° F (37.2° C), take a second measurement rectally. A rectal measurement of temperature is more accurate than an axillary one. **Rectal temperatures higher than 100.5° F (38.1° C) in infants and the very elderly may require immediate medical attention.**

After three months of age, a rectal thermometer, electronic pacifier thermometer or an ear thermometer can be used. Temperatures above 105° F (40.6° C) (oral) can be serious. Medical care is needed. After age 4 or 5, an oral temperature can be taken in a child who will allow it. Electronic thermometers are most commonly used and recommended. The temperature has a digital readout. The older mercury thermometers are no longer recommended. But they may be used if that is all that is available. Use according to the directions provided. **Do not leave your child unattended with a thermometer.**

PROCEDURE

- **To take an oral temperature.** Place the thermometer under the tongue. Keep the mouth closed and the lips holding the thermometer. Breathe through the nose. Leave the thermometer in the mouth for 3 minutes. Wait twenty minutes after eating, drinking or smoking before taking a temperature.
- **To take a rectal temperature.** Use a rectal thermometer. This method is used for infants and small children who are not able to hold a thermometer safely in their mouths. Lubricate the bulb of the thermometer with petroleum jelly. Place the small child face down on a flat surface. Spread the buttocks. Then insert the bulb end of the thermometer about 1/2 to 1 inch into the anal canal. Hold the thermometer in place by squeezing the toddler`s buttock cheeks together. This way if the child moves suddenly, a thermometer is less likely to break off in the rectum. Remove the thermometer after 3 minutes.
- **To take an axillary temperature.** Place the thermometer in the armpit. Keep the arm pressed against the body for 5 minutes.

If the reading on the thermometer is more than 1° above normal, a fever is present. Other problems (*symptoms*) may be present. Abnormally high or low temperatures can be serious. You should consult your caregiver about them. Most children tolerate fevers well. If your child is responding to you normally, drinking fluids and continuing to play, there is probably nothing to worry about.

If your child has no energy, is not responding to you normally, is vomiting, or complaining of pain, you should contact your caregiver. Look for further advice if your child's temperature does not respond to medications.

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