Taking Your Child's Temperature

It is important to know how to take your child's temperature properly so you can treat his or her illness better. Normal body temperature is 97-100 degrees F rectally (36-37.8 C). This can change depending on the time of day, activity level, dress, and the temperature of the surroundings. The axillary (armpit) temperature is about 1 degree F (1/2 degree C) lower than oral; the rectal temperature is about 1 degree F higher than oral.

Several different types of thermometers are available. Oral thermometers have a long narrow bulb; glass rectal thermometers have a short, round bulb. Electronic thermometers are very accurate when used properly. Skin strip thermometers are less reliable, so we do not recommend their use. In a child under 5 years of age, a screening temperature may be taken in the armpit. If the axillary temperature is high, (above 99 F or 37.2 C), you should check it rectally. In children 5 years or older, an oral temperature should be taken.

Be sure the thermometer is clean. It can be washed in cool soapy water and rinsed. For glass thermometers, hold the top and shake it so the mercury is down under the 98 F (36.7 C) mark; to read it, rotate the thermometer until the end of the mercury line is visible. Use one of the following techniques:

- **Rectal -** Lubricate the tip of the thermometer with petroleum jelly. Place the child on his or her stomach, separate the buttocks, and then insert the lubricated thermometer about one inch into the rectum. Do not force it. Be sure to hold your child while the thermometer is in place. Wait 2 minutes before removing and reading it.
- **Oral -** Place the thermometer under the child's tongue as far back as possible. Have the child hold it in place with the lips or fingers while the mouth is closed. Wait 3 minutes before removing and reading.
- **Axillary -** Place the tip of the thermometer into a dry armpit. Hold the upper arm against the chest for 4-5 minutes before removing and reading the thermometer.

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