

Taking Your Child's Temperature

The human body is designed to keep its temperature within a normal range. Sweating is one of your body's many safety features. Perspiration helps to keep your temperature within normal range as the body adjusts to different conditions.

Body temperatures can rise temporarily due to such factors as age, physical activity or emotional stress. For example, if your child is playing outside on a hot day, his temperature will go up, and he will begin to sweat. Being sick can also cause your temperature to rise, known as a fever.

Infants cannot regulate their body temperature as well as adults. It is not wise to overdress them on warm days or underdress them on cold days. With such little skin surface, infants lose heat or overheat fast.

Normal Body Temperature

Normal body temperature when the body is at rest is 98.6° F (37° C). This temperature varies from body to body from hour to hour, and not everyone has a normal 98.6° temperature. If your child's temperature is slightly above or below that figure, there is no cause for alarm.

Fever

If an infant or child (or adult) has a high temperature over a period of time, they have a fever. Fever is usually due to an infection.

Your child has a fever if she has a rectal temperature of 100.4° F or higher. In an infant younger than 3 months, this temperature should be reported to a doctor. If your infant, toddler or child has a rectal temperature of 101° F or higher, call your doctor right away.

Methods of Monitoring

Digital thermometers are safe and accurate and give fast results. They can be used in the mouth (orally), in the rectum or anus (rectally) or under the arm (axillary). You can also use an ear (tympanic) thermometer.

Whichever type of thermometer you decide to use, make sure to read all the directions. In addition, clean and store thermometers according to manufacturer recommendation. The same thermometer can be used in all three methods when cleaned properly, but if you have only one thermometer, choose one way to always take the temperature: orally, under the arm or rectally.

The route you use depends on the child's age, cooperation and condition. Generally, use an under-the-arm or rectal thermometer for infants and toddlers; oral for older children.

How to Take a Temperature

To take an axillary temperature (under the arm) using a digital thermometer, follow these steps:

1. Place the thermometer directly under the armpit.
2. Gently fold the infant's or child's arm across the chest to hold the thermometer in place.
3. Keep the thermometer in position until the thermometer beeps and record the results.
4. A normal temperature using an axillary thermometer is 95.8-98.5° F.

To take an oral temperature using a digital thermometer, follow these steps:

1. Make sure that the child has not had any hot or cold liquids 20-30 minutes before you take the temperature.
2. Place the thermometer under the tongue and have the child close her lips around it.
3. Keep the thermometer in position until the thermometer beeps and record the results.
4. A normal temperature using an oral thermometer is 96.8-99.5° F.

To take a rectal temperature using a digital thermometer in an infant, follow these steps:

1. Put lubrication (Vaseline is not recommended) on the tip of the thermometer as directed, if necessary. (K-Y™ Jelly can be used.)
2. Lay the infant on a firm surface or on your lap and place your hand over the lower back to steady him.
3. Insert the thermometer 1 inch into the anal opening and hold between the second and third finger. (Don't push the thermometer in more than 1 inch.)
4. Keep the thermometer in position until the thermometer beeps and record the results.
5. A normal temperature using a rectal thermometer is 97.8-99.5° F.

Always follow your doctor's instructions when your child has a fever. ✕

Reference

Komaroff, A. (Ed.) (1999). *Harvard Medical School family health guide*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

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