How to take a temperature

Taking a temperature

Fever in children may mean an infection is present. You need to know how to take your child’s temperature correctly so you can report fever to the doctor or nurse.

Some signs of fever include flushed (bright red or pink) cheeks, chills, headache, aching over entire body and skin that feels “hot to touch.” When you see any of these signs, take your child’s temperature.

Your child can be sick without having a fever. Although an elevated temperature is a sign of illness, the way your child looks and behaves can tell you a lot about how sick he or she might be. Any sudden change in your child’s eating or sleeping habits could be a sign of illness, along with irritability. If you are worried about your child and think he or she is sick, please call the doctor.

Choosing a thermometer

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that the traditional glass mercury-containing thermometers no longer be used. If you have one in your home, please call your local sanitation service to find out how to dispose of this thermometer. Mercury is extremely toxic, so these thermometers should never be thrown away in your regular garbage.

Thermometers that can be used in place of the old glass ones include:

- Oral/axillary (under the arm) digital thermometers;
- Digital electronic pacifier thermometers; and
- Tympanic thermometers.

Using a digital thermometer

Digital thermometers are recommended most often because they are easy to read and less likely to break than glass. Also, most give an accurate temperature reading in 30 seconds to 2 minutes. When using a digital thermometer:

- Read its directions beforehand so you know which beeps (or series of beeps) is a sign that the thermometer is finished reading.
- Turn it on and make sure the screen is clear of any old readings.
- Use a disposable plastic sleeve or cover on the thermometer, if your brand of thermometer offers these covers. Remember to discard the cover after each use. And clean the thermometer as the manufacturer recommends before returning it to its base.

Taking an oral temperature

An oral (by mouth) temperature reading is recommended for children old enough to understand directions and be cooperative, usually starting at about 5 to 6 years old and older. Don’t give hot or cold liquids for 15 to 30 minutes before taking a child’s temperature by mouth. If you are using digital thermometers, use a separate one for oral and under-the-arm readings.
• Make sure your child’s mouth is clear of candy, gum or food.
• Place the tip of the thermometer under the child’s tongue, toward the back of the mouth.
• Tell your child to press his or her lips together and be very careful not to bite the thermometer or talk with the thermometer in his or her mouth.
• Stay with your child to make sure he or she remains still. Hold the thermometer in place until it beeps.

**Taking a temperature reading under the arm**

• Remove your child’s shirt so skin surfaces are touching the thermometer. Place the tip of the thermometer high into the center of the armpit and place your child’s arm tightly against his or her side to hold the thermometer in place.
• Stay with your child.
• Leave the thermometer in place until it beeps.

### Using a tympanic thermometer

Tympanic thermometers measure the temperature of blood in the eardrum, which should be an indication of core body temperature. These thermometers are accurate only when used properly. If you choose to use this type of thermometer, you should read all directions before using it, and always follow the manufacturer’s instructions exactly.

• An accurate temperature reading depends on pulling the outer ear backward to straighten the ear canal (back and up if the child is more than a year old).
• Always use a clear lens cover for each tympanic reading. (You should store the thermometer with a clean cover.)
• A tympanic reading should not be done on an infant less than 6 months of age.
• Your tympanic thermometer probably has settings for “oral” and “rectal” readings. This means that the thermometer will convert the reading from the eardrum into the equivalent oral or rectal reading. **Do not insert a tympanic thermometer in the mouth or rectum to take a temperature.**

• If you call your child’s doctor or nurse about a fever, tell them you are using a tympanic thermometer.

**Using a digital electronic pacifier thermometer**

Electronic pacifier thermometers have a heat sensor and are powered by a battery button. These pacifiers let you measure oral temperature in younger children.

• Have your child suck on the pacifier until it reaches a steady state and you hear a beep.

• This usually takes 3 to 4 minutes.

**Using temperature strips**

Liquid crystal strips put on the forehead have been studied and were found to be inaccurate. They do not detect an elevated temperature in most children with fever.

**Preferred method**

The preferred method of taking your child’s temperature is orally (by mouth). If your child is too young to have his or her temperature taken orally or has painful mouth sores, take the temperature under the arm.

**Do not take your child’s temperature rectally.**