

# Fever – common misunderstandings

Many parents worry about possible dangers of fevers. Here is some information to help you understand more about fever.

**Myth:** All fevers are bad for children.

**Fact:** Fevers turn on the body's immune system. Fevers are one of the body's protective mechanisms. **Most fevers are good for children.**

- 37.8°C to 39°C Low-grade fever: beneficial (helps the body) Give paracetamol (eg Panadol) or ibuprofen (eg Nurofen) for symptoms of the illness (eg. discomfort or pain). It is not necessary to use medicine to bring down the fever.
- 39°C to 40°C Moderate-grade fever: beneficial
- Over 40°C Higher fever: causes discomfort. There is a higher risk of a bacterial infection. The child should be seen by a doctor because the cause of the fever may need treatment.
- Over 42°C High fever: the fever itself can be harmful.

**Myth:** Fevers cause brain damage, or fevers over 40°C are dangerous.

**Fact:** **Fevers with infections don't cause brain damage.** Only body temperatures over 42°C can cause brain damage. The body temperature goes this high only with high environmental temperatures (for example, if a child is shut in a closed car in hot weather).

**Myth:** Anyone can have a febrile convulsion (fit triggered by fever).

**Fact:** **Only 4% of children have a febrile convulsion.** Febrile convulsions rarely have anything to do with how high the fever is; they can occur at any temperature over 38°C in

the small number of children who do get them.

**Myth:** Febrile convulsions are harmful.

**Fact:** Febrile convulsions are scary to watch, but they usually stop within 5 minutes. **They cause no permanent harm.** Most children who have had febrile convulsions are not more likely to have developmental delays, learning disabilities, or convulsions without fever.

**Myth:** All fevers need to be treated with fever medicine.

**Fact:** Fevers need to be treated **only if they cause discomfort.** Usually that means fevers of 39°C or higher. Fever is the body's way of fighting infection.

**Myth:** Without treatment, fevers will keep going higher.

**Fact:** Wrong. **The brain controls the body's temperature** (it acts as a thermostat), and will not allow fevers from infection to go higher than about 40.6°C.

**Myth:** If the fever is high, the cause is serious.

**Fact:** If the fever is high, **the cause may or may not be serious.** If your child looks very sick, the cause is more likely to be serious.

**Myth:** With treatment, fevers should come down to normal.

**Fact:** With treatment, fevers usually come down **only 1.1° or a little more.**



**Myth:** If the fever doesn't come down (if you can't "break the fever"), the cause is serious.

**Fact:** Fevers that don't respond to fever medicine can be caused by **viruses or bacteria**. Bacterial infections are more likely to be serious. Whether the medicine works or not doesn't relate to the seriousness of the infection.

**Myth:** The exact number of the temperature is very important.

**Fact:** ***How your child looks is a better way*** of working out if the child is very ill, not the exact temperature.

**Myth:** Temperatures between 37.1°C to 37.8°C are low -grade fevers.

**Fact:** ***The normal temperature changes throughout the day.*** It peaks in the late afternoon and evening and a child who has a temperature of 37.5° is likely to be totally well. A low-grade fever is considered to be 37.8°C to 39°C.

### Reading Temperatures

A reading of 37°C is just the average temperature in the mouth or armpit. The body's temperature normally varies from a low of 36.4°C in the morning to a high of 37.5°C in the late afternoon.

## For more information

### Paediatric Emergency Department

Women's and Children's Hospital  
72 King William Road  
North Adelaide SA 5006  
Tel 08 8161 7044  
Fax 08 8161 6750  
<http://www.wch.sa.gov.au>

Non-English speaking: for information in languages other than English, call the interpreting and Translating Centre and ask them to call Department of Health. This service is available at no cost to you, contact (08) 8226 1990.

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