

Fever

Your child's fever is probably a sign that his body is fighting either a viral or bacterial infection. The fever itself is a symptom, not an illness, and does not mean your child needs an antibiotic. An antibiotic is used only to fight a bacterial infection. Fevers are usually harmless unless they are very high, such as those more commonly associated with heat stroke. Much confusion exists for parents over what actually constitutes a fever. Everyone seems to remember that 98.6 is a normal oral temperature. Theoretically, a normal axillary (underarm) temperature would be a degree lower (97.6) and a normal rectal temperature would be a degree higher (99.6). Of course, these numbers vary, and at any point in time a person's body temperature may vary almost a degree either way of the average and still be normal. You should also be aware that normal body temperatures vary throughout the day, with temperatures tending to be slightly lower in the morning and slightly higher in the evening. Typically, a fever is a temperature of one degree above normal no matter how the temperature is taken.

Fever Under 2 Months of Age

An infant under two months of age with a fever of 100.4, or greater, requires an evaluation as soon as possible. This *sepsis* workup is the standard of care for a baby less than two months of age who develops a rectal fever of 100.4°. The infant will be seen at the doctor's office or local emergency room. Blood will be drawn for a white count and culture, urine (obtained via catheterization) will be analyzed and cultured and a lumbar puncture will be done to obtain spinal fluid for analysis and culture. A chest x-ray will also be taken and the baby will most likely be admitted to the hospital and started on intravenous antibiotics. I understand that this is scary, but it is in the best interest of your baby since an infant with a serious infection may not look very ill until the infection has gotten worse and then it is more difficult to treat.

Taking the Temperature

How you take your baby's temperature, and how you treat a fever change as your baby grows older. Imagine taking a rectal temperature of a toddler—not an easy thing to do! Thus, taking the temperature under the arm, in the ear or with a temporal artery thermometer is more typical. Taking a temperature orally requires

the cooperation of the child to hold the thermometer under her tongue for the required amount of time and is probably not a good idea for children under the age of five. In the first two to three months, it is important to be exact about the baby's temperature. As you know, a baby may feel warm to the touch, but not have a fever. Since the underarm temperature is more a function of skin temperature, it may go up simply by the baby being outside on a warm day or being overbundled. This will decrease on its own by returning the baby to a cool area or by unbundling. If you think the baby is warm, and get a higher than usual reading of your baby's axillary temperature, take a rectal temperature to see if there really is a fever. Much confusion exists over adding or subtracting numbers depending on how the parent took the temperature. If you're confused, you will probably also confuse your doctor. I get calls all the time from parents concerned about their child's fever. They tell me a number, but when I ask how it was taken, I hear many variations of where they took it as well as how many degrees they added. The easiest thing for you and your doctor is to take the temperature and, if you are concerned, call the doctor with the actual number on the thermometer and from where you obtained the reading.

Treating the Fever

If your less than two-month-old baby has a fever, do not give the infant any type of anti-fever medication, and call your baby's doctor right away. If your baby is over two months of age it is safe to use acetaminophen (Tylenol®) at the appropriate dosage for his weight. You may also sponge the baby down with a room temperature wet washcloth to hasten the cooling effect. Sponging with a washcloth works better than bathing the baby as heat dissipates into the air more quickly than it does into water. Do not sponge the baby down with alcohol, as skin absorption and fumes may be toxic. Ibuprofen (Motrin,® Advil,® etc.) is approved for use in babies over the age of six months, and is safe to use at appropriate dosages for weight. Remember, acetaminophen may be dosed as close as four hours apart but ibuprofen may only be dosed as close as six hours apart. Never give aspirin for a fever to a child under sixteen years of age, as aspirin may cause severe side effects including Reye's Syndrome. Always take your child's temperature before giving any medication. Your doctor will want to know the trend of the fever, and you'll know if, and when, your child is responding to the fever medicine.