

How to Take a Temperature Children and Adults

Taking a child's temperature

There are four ways to take a child's temperature:

- under the armpit (axillary)
- in the mouth (oral)
- in the ear (tympanic)
- in the buttocks (rectal)

Taking a rectal temperature provides the most accurate measure of core body temperature. However, taking a rectal temperature is not recommended for babies or young children as this might cause rectal injuries.

Taking a temperature under the armpit is not as exact, but it will let you know if your child has a fever. When children reach the age of six, they can have their temperature taken by mouth.

Ear thermometers are more expensive. Fever strip and pacifier thermometers do not give an accurate temperature. **Do not** use a mercury thermometer. Mercury is toxic and the thermometer could break. Ask the pharmacist any questions you may have when buying a thermometer.

Tips for using a digital thermometer

A digital thermometer is best for taking temperatures by the armpit and mouth. Always remember to press the button to turn the thermometer "on." Follow the instructions for ear, armpit or mouth method. When you hear the "beep," remove the thermometer and read the temperature on the display.

Armpit method

This method is used for newborns and children under six years of age.

- Place the tip of the thermometer in the centre of the child's armpit. The silver tip must touch the skin.
- Make sure the child's arm is tight against his or her body.
- Leave the thermometer in place for about one minute, until you hear the "beep."

Mouth method

This method should **not be used** for children under six years of age.

- Carefully place the tip of the thermometer under the child's tongue.
- With the child's mouth closed, leave the thermometer in place for about one minute, until you hear the "beep."

To clean the thermometer, wash only the tip with soap and warm (not hot) water and wipe off with alcohol. Dry well.

Ear method

These steps can be followed, however, follow the instructions for your specific thermometer.

- Use a clean probe each time.
- Turn the ear thermometer on.
- For babies younger than 12 months, pull the earlobe down and back and for those older than 12 months, up and back. This will help to place the probe in the ear canal.

- Centre the probe tip in the ear and push gently inward toward the eardrum.
- Squeeze and hold the button and read the temperature.

Taking an adult's temperature

Take an adult's temperature by mouth, in the ear or under the armpit. The armpit method is less accurate and is normally only used if the person is extremely drowsy or not clear mentally.

To take an adult's temperature, follow the same method as used for children when using a digital thermometer.

What is a normal temperature?

The normal temperature range varies, depending on the method you use:

Armpit: 35.5°C to 37.4°C (95.9°F to 99.3°F)

Mouth: 36.0°C to 37.5°C (96.8°F to 99.5°F)

Ear: 36.5°C to 38°C (97.7°F to 100.4°F)

Rectum: 36.5°C to 38°C (97.7°F to 100.4°F)

Temperatures may vary throughout the day, rising as much as one degree in the morning and reaching a maximum during the late afternoon. Mild increases can be caused by exercising, too much clothing or bedding, taking a hot bath or being outside in hot weather.

When a child is sick with an infection, it is normal to have a fever (temperature higher than 38°C (100.4°F)). A fever is part of the normal process of fighting an infection. A fever will not hurt a child. Usually, it goes away after three days.

Babies younger than three months old should see a doctor sooner when they have a fever. During the first three months of life, babies are not always able to fight infections, so they need to see a health care professional sooner than older babies and children with fevers.

Older children with fever who seem otherwise well and are drinking enough liquid can be treated at home. The degree of a fever does not indicate how serious the illness is, but rather the child's behaviour, overall appearance and other symptoms such as headache, stiff neck, nausea, and vomiting are generally the most important factors. A fever with other symptoms may mean a more serious illness.

If you have questions or concerns about you or your child's temperature, contact your health care provider or the BC NurseLine.

Adapted with the permission of Alberta Health and Wellness

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