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Fever First-Aid

As your tiny tot's temperature rises, so does your anxiety. Experts tell you how to stay informed and bring it down. BY PRITI SALIAN

"FEVER is simply an indication of an infection in your child's body," says Dr Meena Malkani, consultant paediatrician, Jaslok Hospital & Research Centre, Mumbai. It shows that her immune system is fit to fight against the underlying infection. For the parent, though, the rising temperature will throw up several questions. Is it a viral, is it just cold and cough related? A tummy infection or something more serious? Is it time to see a doctor? When should I administer meds?

Make the first call

"Three important criteria should be used to judge whether your child is really sick and needs to see a doctor instantly—her age, the temperature reading on an accurate thermometer and the associated symptoms," says *Prevention* advisor Dr Arvind Taneja. If your baby is not yet three months old, a rectal temperature of

100.2°F is a matter of concern, he cautions. "Any temperature higher than a rectal reading of 99.6°F in a baby needs consultation," says Dr Anjali Saxena, senior consultant paediatrician, Max Super Speciality Hospital, Delhi. Fever may be a sign of serious infection in children so young, and before the symptoms develop, the infection may have worsened. So see a doctor if your baby is below six months of age and feels even slightly warm.

As your child grows older, your decision to see a doctor should be based on whether she gets low (below 100°F), moderate (between 100 and 102°F) or high-grade fever (above 102°F). "When



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babies older than six months get low grade fever, you could wait a day or two for other symptoms to develop, though other doctors may have a differing opinion," says Saxena. If you notice cough, cold, diarrhoea, vomiting or a rash, call your doctor. Also, if the fever is not accompanied by any symptoms for two days or more, you must get to the doctor. "But if a child's fever is above 104°F, rush to the Emergency ward," urges Taneja.

2 Find out more

Fever is almost always associated with other symptoms. Common cold and mild viral infections are the most common causes in children, which usually run their course. Throwing up a couple of times in sickness is common among children and may not necessarily signal a stomach infection. She may have a blocked nose, a viral infection, gastroenteritis and in rare cases, meningitis. If the vomiting is accompanied by loose motions, it could be an intestinal infection. However, loose motions with blood and mucus should be reported immediately.

"Fever with chills commonly indicates malaria, typhoid or UTIs," says Malkani. If cases of dengue have been reported in your city, look out for complaints of giddiness, pain behind the eyes, stomach ache or jaundice. She may also show reduced urinary output due to increased evaporation of moisture from the skin. Make a note of how many times your child passes urine

Keep a record of body temperature through the day



and report to your doctor. Give her plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration.

3 Raise the red flag

Certain situations could indicate serious trouble. Keep track of:

- **Body rashes** Consult a doctor when you spot them. Rashes could indicate a few common illnesses:
 - **Measles** The rashes usually appear a couple of days after your child begins running a fever.
 - **Roseola** This rash appears only after the fever disappears.
 - **Hand, foot and mouth** The rash first appears on the hands, followed by the foot and then the mouth.
 - **Chicken pox** The rashes are first fluid-filled. They then change to pimple-like lesions and later form crusts. All three stages can be found together in the same child.
 - **Scarlet fever** Fever with rash that has the texture of sandpaper.
 - **Dengue** is a biphasic illness, says Dr Akshay Kapoor, paediatric

gastroenterologist and hepatologist at Delhi's Indrapratha Apollo Hospital. The initial phase is associated with a high grade fever, myalgia and tiny red spots. Occasionally, if the platelet levels fall, you may see pin-point like rashes appear in a cluster.

- **Abdominal pain** with fever could signify anything from constipation to typhoid, stomach flu, hepatitis, or even sickle cell anaemia, stones, appendicitis. Fever causes body discomfort, which kids associate with tummy ache. If your child complains of pain but is still able to concentrate on other things, it may not be serious. But if she cries inconsolably and doubles up with pain, seek consultation immediately.
- **A stiff neck** with fever could mean either viral or bacterial meningitis. Associated symptoms like a headache and vomiting, sensitivity to light in your child are a definite sign of meningitis.
- **Ear ache** with fever usually implies middle ear infection.
- **Febrile seizures** happen when your kid's temperature shoots up suddenly and the young brain cannot cope with it. Kids between 6 months and 5 years usually get affected, especially if they have a family history of seizures. "In 50% of the kids, a febrile seizure never



Four types of thermometers could help you find out.

Rectal thermometer Highly recommended by doctors for its accuracy as it indicates core body temperature. This is the best choice for a child until the age of three. To use it, lay your child on her back with her legs up. Lubricate the tip of the thermometer with petroleum jelly and insert about 0.5 to 1 inch in your baby's rectum. Hold her legs up as well as the thermometer till it beeps.

Ear thermometer Dr Arvind Taneja recommends this for the 3 to 5 year age group although it can be used for all ages. "It is especially useful for kids who refuse to cooperate," says Dr Meena Malkani. Just insert it in the ear canal and you'll get an accurate reading in a couple of seconds!

Digital oral thermometer It is advisable to use an oral thermometer on children aged 5 and above. "Being battery operated, there may be times when it may not work accurately due to a drained battery," says Dr Meena Malkani. She recommends the use of a **mercury thermometer** instead. Wait for 15 minutes before using the thermometer if your child has had a hot or cold drink.

Strip thermometer This measures temperature by placing it directly on the forehead. While it may be a convenient option for children who cannot use the oral thermometer, it does not give an accurate reading, so doctors don't recommend it.

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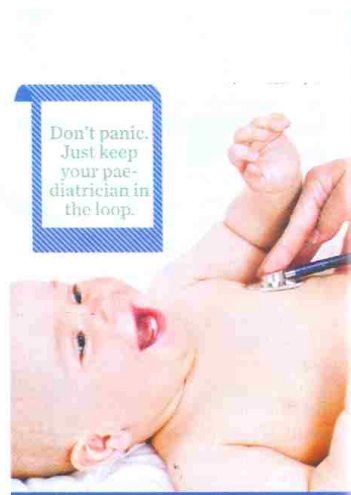
repeats itself," says Saxena. Even so, it is essential that parents be vigilant when their child runs a temperature. Sometimes a child's fever can rise in 15-20 minutes without anyone realising it, causing a seizure. "Sponge her to bring the fever down and rush her to the nearest medical facility. There is no need to put a spoon in your child's mouth or pour water on her, contrary to common belief," she adds.

■ **Urinary tract infection** If your child has flank pain or experiences pain while passing urine, she probably has a UTI and needs to see a doctor. Sometimes, UTIs manifest only as fever without the other symptoms.

4 Get the fever down

Antipyretics should be used to bring down a fever below 104°F. They can be given at a temperature of 100.5°F to your child. Try paracetamol first but check the dosage with your paediatrician. It is crucial to give the correct dose to your child based on her weight. Paediatricians recommend 15 mg/kg of body weight. "If the fever doesn't go down in an hour, you could give her an NSAID (Ibugesic) like mefenamic acid (Mefal)," says Taneja. Nimesulide preparations are to be strictly avoided in children, adds Kapoor. If the fever continues to rise even an hour after this, run to your doctor. Dress your child down and switch on the fan and the air conditioner if the child is not feeling too cold.

"There is no need to resort to sponging unless the temperature touches the 104°F mark," says Taneja. If it



does, dip a cloth in tepid water and moisten your child's body allowing the water to evaporate. You could repeat the procedure five to six times to get the temperature down by a degree or two. "Never use cold water or ice for sponging your child unless she's suffered a heat stroke, Taneja adds.

"Antibiotics should not be used as a matter of routine in treating fever. They are only meant to treat bacterial infections like a UTI, typhoid or tonsillitis," says Prof Anupam Sibal, Group Medical Director, Apollo Hospitals. There are times when your child may get fever again after taking a course of antibiotics. "Sometimes, the culprit may be antibiotics themselves, or a relapse or a new infection," says Sibal. Don't panic. Just make sure that you keep your paediatrician in the know and wait. After all, what goes up, will come down! 🍀