

Massachusetts Department of Public Health

Flu: What You Can Do – Caring for People at Home Fever and the Flu

Fall 2007

Fever is a higher than normal body temperature. It is the most common symptom of the flu. Although fever may cause worry, it helps the body fight infection and is usually not harmful.

A person with the flu may experience a fever that:

- Increases quickly, rising to a peak of 101°–104° F within 12–24 hours.
- Comes and goes, especially if medicines are used to treat it.
- Typically lasts 3–5 days.

Treatment

Anyone older than age 6 months who has a temperature below 101°F probably does not need to be treated for fever, unless he or she is uncomfortable.

Things you can do to keep a person with fever comfortable:

- Keep the room comfortably cool.
- Make sure the person is wearing light-weight clothing.
- Encourage the person to drink fluids, such as water or diluted fruit juices. See page 19 for more on how to make sure he or she is drinking enough.
- Consider sponging the person with lukewarm water if he or she:
 - Has a temperature above 104°F
 - Is vomiting and unable to take medicine
 - Has had a seizure caused by fever in the past

Do not use cold water, which can cause shivering and make the fever worse.

Do not use rubbing alcohol to try to bring down someone's temperature.

Alcohol can be absorbed through the skin and cause health problems, especially for children.

Medication

Fever-reducing medicines can be used if the person is uncomfortable. Use medicine that is right for the person's age and follow label directions carefully. These medicines are safe and effective if given correctly:

- Acetaminophen, such as Tylenol[®] or a store brand
- Ibuprofen, such as Advil[®], Motrin[®], or a store brand
- Aspirin, such as Bayer[®] or a store brand, for adults only

Never give aspirin to someone younger than 19 years old unless recommended by a doctor.

How to take a temperature

There are different ways to take a temperature depending on the age of the person who is sick.

- **Newborn to 3 years old:** Take a temperature with a rectal thermometer (by bottom).
- **3 - 5 years old:** Take a rectal, ear, or armpit temperature.
- **5 years and older:** Take an oral temperature (by mouth) for the most accurate reading. A temperature can also be taken by armpit or by ear.

Whenever you take someone's temperature, it is important to remember the following:

- Always clean a thermometer with soap and water before and after each use.
- Every time you take a temperature, write down the time, temperature reading, where you took the temperature from, and the type and amount of medicine given (if any).
- If the person who is sick has been using medicine to bring down the fever, take his or her temperature before the next dose is due.
- The length of time to measure a temperature depends on the type of thermometer you use. Read the manufacturer's instructions for details.

Never leave a person alone while the temperature is being taken.

Do not use mercury thermometers. If you have a mercury thermometer, contact your local health department to learn how to safely dispose of it.

NORMAL TEMPERATURE RANGES

- Rectum (bottom): 97.9° – 100.3°F
- Ear: 96.4° – 100.4°F
- Mouth: 95.9° – 99.5°F
- Armpit: 94.5° – 99.1°F

For some elderly people, a “normal temperature” may be different than for others. The elderly may regularly take medicines such as aspirin, ibuprofen, or acetaminophen, which can lower body temperature. There are two ways you can decide what a fever is for an elderly person:

- A rise of 2°F or more over the “normal temperature” for the person.
- An oral temperature of more than 99°F.

Rectal temperature (by bottom)

1. Put a small amount of lubricant, such as Vaseline[®], on the end of a digital rectal thermometer.
2. Place the child on his or her belly across your lap or on a firm surface. Hold the child by placing your hand on his or her lower back, just above the child’s bottom.
3. With your other hand, put the thermometer about one half to one inch into the anal opening. Do not insert the thermometer any further. Hold the thermometer in place loosely with two fingers, keeping your hand cupped around the child’s bottom.
4. Hold the thermometer in place for the amount of time in the manufacturer’s directions or until you hear a beep.

Ear temperature

1. Use a thermometer made specifically for use in the ear.
2. Gently pull the top part of the ear back and up. This will straighten the ear canal and make it easier to put the thermometer in correctly.
3. Gently put the ear thermometer into the ear canal until it is snugly inside.
4. Hold the button down for the amount of time written in the manufacturer’s directions.

Oral temperature (by mouth)

1. Do not let the person drink any liquid for at least 15 minutes before taking the temperature.
2. Place the thermometer under the person’s tongue towards the back of the mouth. Ask the person to close his or her mouth and not bite down on the thermometer.
3. Hold the thermometer for the amount of time written in the manufacturer’s directions.

Armpit temperature

1. Place the end of an oral or rectal digital thermometer in the person's armpit.
2. Hold his or her arm tightly against the chest for about 1 minute, or until you hear the “beep.”

When to call a doctor

Get **emergency** medical care if someone has difficulty breathing, chest pain, severe or continued vomiting, or is confused or unaware of his or her surroundings.

Children younger than 5 years old

Age	Call a doctor if your child has this temperature of...
Younger than 3 months old	100.4°F or higher, even if she or he seems otherwise complete healthy
Between 3 months and 2 years old	102°F or higher, even if she or he seems otherwise completely healthy
Between 2 and 5 years old	102°F or higher <i>OR</i> If the fever lasts more than 3 days, or you are concerned about how the child is acting

Children age 5 years and older and adults

Call a doctor if the person who has the fever has any of the following symptoms:

- Fever of 104°F or higher that does not go down within 2 hours of home treatment
- Any fever that lasts more than 3 days
- Is not drinking fluids or is unable to hold them down
- Major changes in mood and awareness
- Seizures (uncontrolled twitching, shaking, or convulsions)
- Symptoms that improve for 24 hours and then worsen, with more fever and cough
- Still “acts sick” after the fever is brought down
- Unusual eye sensitivity to bright light
- Stiff neck or pain when bending his or her head forward
- Severe headache
- Unusual skin rash
- Severe swelling in the throat
- Not feeling better in 3–5 days
- Any other unusual symptoms or concerns
- Any worsening of an existing chronic illness