



How to Take a Temperature

Normal body temperature vary slightly from person to person; the average “normal” body temperature is 98.6°F (Fahrenheit) or 37.0°C (centigrade). Body temperature plays an important role in determining if a child is sick. Body temperature rises as a response to fight off infection. A thermometer is used to take a temperature.

What are the different types of thermometers?

There are many different types of thermometers available. They include oral (by mouth), rectal (by bottom), tympanic (by ear), digital (automatic numerical readout), and temperature strips that are applied to the forehead to measure temperature.

Always look to see if your glass thermometer is rectal or oral before taking a temperature. There is no difference in the way they take temperatures, but the shape of the tip is different. A rectal thermometer has a round tip while an oral thermometer has a longer, thin tip. A rectal thermometer should never be used to take an oral temperature and an oral thermometer should never be used to take a rectal temperature. Both thermometers can be used to take an axillary (under the armpit) temperature.

How do I read a glass thermometer?

There are two rows of printing on a glass thermometer. One row of numbers goes from 94°F to 106°F and the other row of numbers goes from 34°C to 42°C. To read a thermometer, hold it in front of your eyes so that you can see both rows of printing at the same time. Slowly roll the thermometer back and forth and you will see a silver ribbon between the printed lines. Your child’s temperature is read where the silver ribbon ends.

How do I take my child’s temperature?

Always shake a glass thermometer to get the end of the silver ribbon down below 94°F (34°C). Choose the method that is best for your child’s age. Rectal or oral temperatures are the most accurate.

Rectal

Rectal temperatures are the most accurate. They are recommended for children who are under 3 years of age. To take a rectal temperature put a little Vaseline on the tip of the rectal thermometer to help it slide in the rectum more easily. Put the thermometer into the rectal opening no more than one inch (NEVER FORCE IT). Hold your child still, and press his buttocks together to help hold the thermometer in place. Hold the thermometer in the rectum for 2 to 3 minutes with a glass thermometer, or until you hear a beep with a digital thermometer.

Oral

Oral temperatures are recommended for children over 5 years of age. Do not give cold or hot liquids to your child for a half hour before taking an oral temperature. Place the tip of the thermometer under the child's tongue in the back of his mouth. Have your child hold the thermometer in place with his lips and fingers and make sure he does not bite on the thermometer. Stay with your child while taking his temperature. Hold the thermometer in the mouth for 3 minutes with a glass thermometer or until you hear the beep with a digital thermometer. The glass thermometer should be cleaned between uses using soap and water, or alcohol.

Axillary

Axillary temperatures are taken under the armpit. This method is sometimes used for older infants and small children who are difficult to hold for a rectal temperature. The armpit should be dry before taking the temperature. Place the tip of the thermometer high in your child's armpit. Hold it in place by holding your child's arm down by his side, for 5 minutes for a glass thermometer or until you hear a beep with a digital thermometer. Axillary temperatures are often inaccurate and should only be used if your child has a chronic illness or if recommended by your doctor.

Tympanic

Tympanic temperatures are taken by reading the temperature of the eardrum. The tip of a tympanic thermometer is placed in the ear canal and it measures the temperature in less than 2 seconds. It causes no discomfort and requires no cooperation by your child, but may be the least accurate way to take your child's temperature.

When should I call a doctor?

Call your doctor **immediately** for any child **3 months of age and under** with a temperature higher than 100.5°F (38.0°C) rectally and give fever medicine only as instructed by your doctor. If you are unable to reach your doctor go directly to the nearest emergency room.

For children **3-6 months** of age if temperature is higher than 100.5°F (38.0°C) rectally.

For children **6-24 months** of age if temperature is higher than 102.0°F (38.9°C) rectally, or over 100.5°F (38.0°C) rectally for more than 24 hours.

For children **over 24 months of age** if temperature is higher than 102.0°F (38.9°C) rectally, or over 100.5°F (38.0°C) rectally for more than 48 hours.

For children less than 36 months of age a rectal temperature is the most accurate way to take your child's temperature. Other ways of taking your child's temperature can underestimate the degree of fever.

In addition, call your doctor:

- If your child looks or acts sick, even when the temperature is normal (98.6°F, 37.0°C)
- If your child is having difficulty breathing or swallowing
- If your child is unusually tired, or difficult to wake
- If your child has frequent vomiting
- If your child looks dehydrated: no urine output for 8 hours, sunken eyes, dry lips and tongue, no tears when crying
- If your child has a specific complaint e.g. earache, pain with urination