

## How do I take my child's temperature?

This might seem like a simple question, until it's the middle of the night and you are faced with a sick child and you've never done it before. In fact, we get asked this quite a bit.

There are just a few things you need to know. First, while you can often tell if a child has a fever just by touch, there are many times when this will not be accurate enough to justify the decisions which might follow from it. Good enough to decide when to give Tylenol? Probably. Good enough to decide who needs x-rays or blood work? Probably not. As a rule of thumb, if the problem is big enough to warrant a trip to the doctor, it's probably time to use a thermometer.

For safety and environmental reasons, we no longer recommend using mercury thermometers. Digital thermometers usually provide the most accurate and easy to read results, and they are widely available.

Many people like to use ear or tympanic thermometers. While these are easy to use and often accurate, they are also very susceptible to well known errors resulting from ear wax, the size or shape of the ear canal, and the angle of insertion. Frequently parents will report to us that their child has a fever in one ear but not the other!

Temporal artery thermometers are now increasingly available and can provide an easy way to measure your child's temperature. However, this is still a relatively new technology and relatively expensive as well. We are not recommending them at this time.

Pacifier thermometers are also marketed as an easy way to take a baby's temperature, but we do not believe they have the accuracy required and, thus, do not recommend them.

Instead, we usually recommend parents **use a basic digital thermometer** and take either a rectal, axillary, or oral temperature. The choice depends, in part, on the age of your child.

### Rectal Temperatures

If your child is younger than 3 years old, a rectal temperature will probably provide you with the most accurate reading. Under 3 months of age, we strongly recommend it as the only way to get reliable information. Some parents may be uncomfortable measuring the temperature this way, but it is probably easier than you think.

- Clean the thermometer with luke warm water or rubbing alcohol
- Apply a small amount of lubricant, like petroleum jelly (Vaseline) to the end.

- You can position your child face down on your lap or a firm surface with your free hand on the small of the back, or lie them face up with your free hand behind their thighs.
- With your other hand, turn on the thermometer and insert the small, lubricated tip into the anus about 1/2 to 1 inch, but no further. Keep it in place for about one minute, or until the device signals that it is done. You can then take it out and read it.
- You should label your rectal thermometer for rectal use only.

### **Axillary Temperatures**

If your child is older than 3 months, you may choose to use an axillary (armpit) temperature. Although a bit less accurate, this temperature is usually reliable enough for most purposes. While these temperatures do tend to be lower than oral or rectal temperatures, please do not assume that the “real” temperature is a degree higher than your axillary temperature. When you talk to us, it is better simply to report both the number and how you measured it. We’ll take it from there.

- Again clean the thermometer with luke warm water or rubbing alcohol
- Place the tip of the thermometer vertically into the armpit and hold your child’s arm tightly against the body for 1 minute, or until the device signals that it is done.

### **Oral Temperatures**

If your child is older than 4 or five years, you may prefer to take an oral temperature. In a cooperative patient, this provides a convenient and accurate reading.

- Again, clean the thermometer with luke warm water or rubbing alcohol
- Be sure to wait at least 15 minutes following any hot or cold drinks before taking an oral temperature.
- Turning the thermometer on, place the small tip under the tongue as far back in the mouth as is comfortable.
- Hold it in place for about 1 minute, or until the device signals that it is done.

It’s as simple as that.