

Fever Myths and Facts

Misconceptions about the dangers of fever are commonplace. Unwarranted fears about harmful side effects from fever cause lost sleep and unnecessary stress for many parents. Let the following facts help you put fever into perspective:

MYTH: All fevers are bad for children.

FACT: Fevers turn on the body's immune system. Fevers are one of the body's protective mechanisms.

Most fevers between 100°F and 104°F (38°C to 40°C) are good for sick children and help the body fight infection. The exception is babies less than 3 months of age. They should be seen by a healthcare provider right away.

MYTH: Fevers cause brain damage or fevers over 104°F (40°C) are dangerous.

FACT: Fevers with infections don't cause brain damage. Only body temperatures over 108°F (42°C) can cause brain damage. The body temperature goes this high only with extreme environmental temperatures (for example, if a child is confined in a closed car in hot weather).

MYTH: Anyone can have a febrile seizure (seizure triggered by fever).

FACT: Only 4% of children have a febrile seizures.

MYTH: Febrile seizures are harmful.

FACT: Febrile seizures are scary to watch, but they usually stop within 5 minutes. They cause no permanent harm. Children who have had febrile seizures do not have a greater risk for developmental delays, learning disabilities, or seizures without fever.

MYTH: All fevers need to be treated with fever medicine.

FACT: Fevers need to be treated only if they cause discomfort. Usually that means fevers over 102°F or 103°F (39°C or 39.4°C).

MYTH: Without treatment, fevers will keep going higher.

FACT: Wrong. Because the brain has a thermostat, fevers from infection usually top out at 103°F to 104°F (39.4°C to 40°C).

MYTH: With treatment, fevers should come down to normal.

FACT: With treatment, fevers usually come down 2° or 3°F (1.1° or 1.7°C).

MYTH: If the fever doesn't come down (if you can't "break the fever"), the cause is serious.

FACT: Fevers that don't respond to fever medicine can be caused by viruses or bacteria. Whether the medicine works or not doesn't relate to the seriousness of the infection. How your child looks is what's important.

MYTH: Once the fever comes down with medicines, it should stay down.

FACT: The fever will normally last for 2 or 3 days with most viral infections. Therefore, when the fever medicine wears off, the fever will return and need to be treated again. The fever will go away and not return once your child's body overpowers the virus (usually by the fourth day).

MYTH: If the fever is high, the cause is serious.

FACT: If the fever is high, the cause may or may not be serious. If your child looks very sick, the cause is more likely to be serious.

MYTH: The exact number of the temperature is very important.

FACT: How your child looks is what's important, not the exact temperature.

MYTH: Temperatures between 98.7°F and 100°F (37.1°C to 37.8°C) are low-grade fevers.

FACT: These temperatures are normal variations. The body's temperature normally changes throughout the day. It peaks in the late afternoon and evening. A actual low-grade fever is 100°F to 102°F (37.8°C to 39°C).

MYTH: Feed a cold, starve a fever.

FACT: This old saying should be ignored. Fevers cause the body to lose fluids through sweating and breathing. Children with fevers need extra fluids. Children with a fever may or may not be hungry for food. If they are hungry, offer the food that they choose. It is helpful to do so.

Summary: remember that fever is fighting off your child's infection.