Fever in children

What is a fever?

A fever is when the body's temperature is higher than normal (above 38 degrees). Fever is the body's natural response to help fight off infection. It is not necessary to treat the fever itself, but children may feel awful when their fever is high and so medication can be given to help them feel more comfortable.

It is normal for children to have mild infections that cause fever. The younger the child, the more often they occur. Infections are very common when children have contact with other children, such as when they start day care or school.

It is normal for children to get between 5 and 10 infections a year, and often 2 or 3 will occur in a row. Children who attend day-care will get twice as many infections per year as those who don't. At times it may seem that they are never well, but this is not necessarily anything to worry about. Parents often worry their child has an immunity problem, but this is not usually the case.

What causes fever?

Most fevers are caused by viruses such as the common cold. Much less commonly fevers can be caused by a bacterial infection. Fever is NOT caused by teething, but teething may make your child more uncomfortable or irritable. The height of the fever does NOT mean a child has a more serious infection.

What usually happens?

The first sign that your child has an infection is that they are just not quite their usual selves. You might then notice a fever, loss of energy and some irritability. They may not want to eat or play as they usually do. Most viruses last about a week, but the first few days are often the worst.

Caring for a child with fever

If your child is very hot and uncomfortable you can try these simple steps:

- Dress your child in light comfortable clothing – appropriate for the environment. Avoid a cool environment (or cold bath) as this will encourage shivering, which will increase the fever.
- Give paracetamol or ibuprofen (which are both pain treating medications) only if your child is distressed or uncomfortable, but not for fever alone.
- Don't be too worried that your child is not eating (as much as normal), but make sure your child is drinking enough. Try offering small amounts of fluids frequently.

- Most viral infections do not need specific treatment. A bacterial infection may need antibiotics and your doctor will assess the need for these.

When to seek help

You should see a doctor if you are worried about your child, or if your child has any of the following:

- headache or neck pain
- lethargy or sleepiness or is floppy
- is very irritable
- they look sicker than you would expect from a minor infection
- pain when passing urine, or tummy pain
- rash
- if your baby is less than 3 months old and has a fever.

If you have any other concerns take your child to your GP or emergency department.