

Understanding NICE guidance

Information for people who use NHS services

Fever in children younger than 5 years

NICE 'clinical guidelines' advise the NHS on caring for people with specific conditions or diseases and the treatments they should receive.

This booklet is about the care and treatment of children aged under 5 years with fever in the NHS in England and Wales. It explains guidance (advice) from NICE (the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence). It is written for parents, families and carers of children with fever but it may also be useful for anyone with an interest in the condition.

The booklet aims to help you understand the care and treatment options that should be available in the NHS. It does not describe fever or the tests or treatments for it in detail. Your healthcare professional should discuss these with you. There are examples of questions you could ask throughout this booklet to help you with this. Some sources of further information and support are on the back page.



Contents

Your child's care	3
Fever in children	4
Measuring your child's fever	5
Working out the cause of the fever	6
Caring for your child at home	8
Caring for your child in hospital	10
More information	12
About NICE	12

The advice in the NICE guideline covers the tests and treatment that should be given to children younger than 5 years who have a fever and whose parents or carers contact or visit a healthcare professional on their behalf. This guideline is intended for children who have already been assessed by a healthcare professional.

Your child's care

Your child's treatment and care should take into account your child's and family's needs and preferences, and you have the right to be fully informed and to make decisions in partnership with your child's healthcare team. To help with this, your child's healthcare team should give you (and, where appropriate, your child) information you can understand and that is relevant to you and your child's circumstances. All healthcare professionals should treat you and your child with respect, sensitivity and understanding and explain fever and its management simply and clearly.

The information you get from your healthcare team should include details of the possible benefits and risks of particular treatments. You and your child can ask any questions you want to and can always change your mind as your child's treatment progresses or your child's condition or your own circumstances change.

Your child's treatment and care, and the information you are given about it, should take account of any religious, ethnic or cultural needs you may have. It should also take into account any additional factors, such as physical or learning disabilities, sight or hearing problems, or difficulties with reading or speaking English. Your healthcare team should be able to arrange an interpreter or an advocate (someone who supports you in putting across your views) if needed.

In an emergency, if the person with parental responsibility for the child can't be contacted healthcare professionals may decide to provide treatment that is immediately necessary in the best interests of the child.

If you think that your child's care does not match what is described in this booklet, please talk to a member of your healthcare team.

Fever in children

A fever is an increase in your child's body temperature. Fever in children is common although it can cause anxiety for parents and carers. You may seek support from healthcare services but in most cases you can be reassured that your child is best cared for at home. You may want support and advice to do this confidently.

Almost all children recover quickly and without problems. In a very small proportion of children, the fever may not improve or the child's health may worsen, which can sometimes be a sign of a serious illness or infection.

If you are concerned about your child's fever, you can seek support from a healthcare professional.

Measuring your child's fever

When you report that your child has an increased temperature, your healthcare professional should take this seriously.

The height of temperature or the length of time your child has a fever are not useful when working out how ill your child is. This is different for very young babies.

Fever in babies under 6 months is rare and can be a sign of serious illness or infection. If your baby is younger than 3 months and has a fever (38°C or above), or is between 3 and 6 months of age with a temperature of 39°C or above, they may need further tests at hospital.

Your healthcare professional should measure and record your child's temperature (usually by using a thermometer under the arm or in the ear).

Working out the cause of the fever

If you are talking to a healthcare professional on the telephone, they should ask you questions about your child's health and symptoms. This will help them to decide if your child is best cared for at home or if they need to see a healthcare professional face to face. Very occasionally, an ambulance may be called if it is an emergency. This may not mean that your child has a serious illness but that they need to be seen quickly in case any treatment is needed.

If you see a healthcare professional face to face, they should examine your child to try to find what is causing the fever and to rule out serious illness and infection.

Your healthcare professional should measure and record your child's:

- temperature
- pulse (heart rate)
- breathing (respiratory rate).

They should also check for signs of dehydration. Your healthcare professional may also ask for a urine sample because a urinary tract infection is a common cause of fever in children.

Sometimes your healthcare professional will not find a reason for your child's fever, even after a full examination. Antibiotics should not be prescribed for children with fever if the cause is not known.

Based on the examination, your healthcare professional will decide how best to care for your child. Most children can be cared for at home (see page 8). Sometimes your healthcare professional may decide that your child needs a follow-up appointment, or they may need to make sure that you can phone or see a healthcare professional at any time of the day or night. They should also give you information on warning symptoms and how to get further help.

A small proportion of children will need further assessment or tests in hospital (see page 10).

Questions you might want to ask your healthcare professional

- What can I do to help my child feel comfortable?
- When and how should I seek further help for my child?

Caring for your child at home

Most children with fever can be cared for at home. You should be given advice on how to care for your child and when to seek further help.

There are medicines (known as antipyretics) that are commonly used to reduce fever. Paracetamol and ibuprofen are antipyretics. These medicines can help to lower your child's temperature and make your child feel more comfortable but they do not treat the cause of the fever. It is okay to give your child paracetamol or ibuprofen if they have a fever and they are distressed or unwell. These medicines should not be given at the same time, but if you give your child one medicine and it does not help, you may want to consider using the other. You should always check the instructions on the bottle or packet or ask your healthcare professional if you need more information.

Do the 'tumbler test' if your child has a rash. Press a glass tumbler firmly against the rash. If you can see the spots through the glass and they do not fade this is called a 'non-blanching rash'. If this rash is present seek medical advice immediately.

Your healthcare professional should advise you:

- to offer your child regular drinks (if you are breastfeeding then breast milk is best)
- to look for signs that your child may be dehydrated (dry mouth, no tears, sunken eyes, sunken fontanelle – the soft spot on a baby's head)
- to encourage your child to drink more fluids if they are dehydrated, and seek further advice if you are worried
- how to look for and identify a non-blanching rash (a rash that does not disappear with pressure)
- to check on your child during the night
- to keep your child away from school or nursery while they have a fever and notify them of your child's absence.

- Do not over or under dress your child.
- Do not sponge your child with water. This does not help to reduce fever.

Seeking further advice

You should seek further advice from your healthcare professional if:

- your child develops a non-blanching rash
- your child has a fit
- your child's health gets worse
- the fever lasts for more than 5 days
- you are worried
- you have concerns about looking after your child at home.

Caring for your child in hospital

If you have taken your child directly to the hospital, your child will be examined as described on page 6 (see 'Working out the cause of the fever'). If you have been referred to the hospital by another healthcare professional, your child should be seen by a paediatric specialist (a healthcare professional who specialises in caring for children).

The advice on caring for your child's fever at home (see page 8) will be similar when your child is in hospital.

While in hospital, your child may have their blood and urine tested. Sometimes your healthcare professional will recommend a chest X-ray.

Your healthcare professional may want to carry out some additional tests or keep your child in hospital for a few hours to see if your child's symptoms get better or worse. Your healthcare professional should explain these tests and the reasons for doing them to you.

They may ask you if they can give paracetamol or ibuprofen to help make your child feel more comfortable or to help get a clearer idea of your child's symptoms. If your child is very unwell or younger than 3 months, your healthcare professional may ask you if they can give your child antibiotics while they carry out further tests.

When your healthcare professional is confident that your child is well enough to go home, they should advise you how to look after your child and when to seek further advice (see page 9).

Staying in hospital

Your child may need to stay in hospital for more tests, treatment or for observation, and your healthcare professional should explain the reasons for this to you.

Before deciding whether your child should stay in hospital, your healthcare professional should take into account your child's health and:

- your family's circumstances
- other illnesses that may affect your child or other family members
- your knowledge of your child's health and how worried you are about their condition
- any recent contact that your child has had with people who have a serious infection
- any recent travel abroad
- your previous experience of fever and feverish illness
- the length of time that your child has had a fever.

Questions you might want to ask your healthcare professional

- Please tell me more about the tests my child needs.
- What do these tests involve and how long will it take to get the results?
- Can I stay with my child while we are at the hospital?

More information

The organisations below can provide more information and support. Please note that NICE is not responsible for the quality or accuracy of any information or advice provided by these organisations.

- Action for Sick Children, 0800 074 4519
www.actionforsickchildren.org
- Meningitis Research Foundation, 080 8800 3344
www.meningitis.org
- The Meningitis Trust, 0800 028 1828
www.meningitis-trust.org

NHS Direct online (www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk) may also be a good starting point for finding out more. Your local Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) may also be able to give you further information and support.

About NICE

NICE produces guidance (advice) for the NHS about preventing, diagnosing and treating different medical conditions. The guidance is written by independent experts including healthcare professionals and people representing patients and carers. They consider the best available evidence on the condition and treatments, the views of patients and carers and the experiences of doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals working in the field. Staff working in the NHS are expected to follow this guidance.

To find out more about NICE, its work and how it reaches decisions, see www.nice.org.uk/aboutguidance

This booklet and other versions of this guideline aimed at healthcare professionals are available at www.nice.org.uk/CG047

You can order printed copies of this booklet from the NHS Response Line (phone 0870 1555 455 and quote reference N1248).