



## Taking a Child's Temperature

There are many different ways to take a child's temperature:

- **Digital thermometers** are accurate and easy to read; they can be used for mouth, armpit, or rectal (bottom) readings.
- **Temperature strips** are not as accurate as digital thermometers and should only be used for armpit or forehead temperatures.
- **Ear thermometers** are quick and easy to use, but they are expensive; don't use ear thermometers for children younger than three months.
- **Mercury/glass thermometers** are not recommended.

### How to Take a Temperature with a Digital Thermometer

Whenever a person feels hot or cold to the touch, it's a good idea to take his or her temperature, and write it down along with the time that the temperature was taken. Knowing the person's exact temperature will help you if you need to call your doctor. Never take a child's temperature after a bath or after he or she has been bundled in blankets because the reading will not be accurate.

Taking a **rectal temperature** is easy and is recommended for children younger than 6 or anyone who can't hold a digital thermometer in their mouth. Be sure to write with a permanent marker on the thermometer used for rectal readings to indicate that it is to be used only for rectal readings. Follow these steps to take a rectal temperature:

1. Clean the digital thermometer's tip with cool, soapy water, or wipe it with 70 percent isopropyl alcohol.
2. Put Vaseline or another lubricant on the tip or bulb.
3. Hold your child bottom-up across your lap.
4. Hold the thermometer 1 inch from the tip, and gently insert it into the rectum—no more than 1 inch. Do not let go of the thermometer; hold it at the rectal opening so it cannot slip in any further.
5. Wait until you hear the signal indicating that the thermometer is finished. Read the temperature on the thermometer, and record the temperature and the time of day.
6. Clean the digital thermometer's tip with cool, soapy water, or wipe it with 70 percent isopropyl alcohol.

Taking an **oral temperature** (by mouth) is recommended for children older than 6 years. To get an accurate reading, be sure to wait 20–30 minutes after your child eats or drinks before taking your child's oral temperature. Follow these steps:

1. Clean the digital thermometer's tip with cool, soapy water, or wipe it with 70 percent isopropyl alcohol.
2. Place the tip of the thermometer under your child's tongue, and have the child close his or her lips around the thermometer. Tell the child not to bite the thermometer and to breathe through their nose and not to talk.

3. Wait until you hear the signal indicating the thermometer is finished. Read the temperature on the thermometer, and record the temperature and the time of day.
4. Clean the digital thermometer's tip with cool, soapy water, or wipe it with 70 percent isopropyl alcohol.

You may also take an **armpit (axillary) temperature** by following these steps:

1. Clean the digital thermometer's tip with cool, soapy water, or wipe it with 70 percent isopropyl alcohol.
2. Remove your child's shirt (the thermometer should touch skin only—not clothing).
3. Lift your child's arm, and place the tip of the digital thermometer in your child's armpit. Lower the arm, and fold it completely across the chest to hold the thermometer in place.
4. Wait until you hear the signal indicating the thermometer is finished. Read the temperature on the thermometer, and record the temperature and the time of day.
5. Clean the digital thermometer's tip with cool, soapy water, or wipe it with 70 percent isopropyl alcohol.

### **When Should I Call my Child's Doctor?**

In infants younger than 2 months, the rectal temperature should not be higher than 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit. If it is higher, call your doctor because this could be a sign of a potentially serious infection.

In children older than 2 months, contact their doctor if they have:

- a rectal temperature of 101 degrees Fahrenheit or higher, or
- an oral temperature of 99.5 degrees Fahrenheit or higher, or
- an armpit reading of 99 degrees Fahrenheit or higher.

### **Resource**

*Healthwise Handbook, A Self-care Guide for You*, 16th edition, pages 350–351.

KidsHealth website: [http://www.kidshealth.org/PageManager.jsp?dn=KidsHealth&lic=1&ps=107&cat\\_id=128&article\\_set=26453](http://www.kidshealth.org/PageManager.jsp?dn=KidsHealth&lic=1&ps=107&cat_id=128&article_set=26453)



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