

"Trying to smack down a fever when a child is sick is like shooting your attack dog when someone is breaking into your house."

— Suzanne Humphries, MD

The dangers of fever and misconceptions

When a child has a fever it can be a worrying time for parents, and when an adult has a fever there is commonly a pressure to bring it down and get back to normal as quickly as possible. Pressures of modern life and misconceptions about the role of fever in the immune response mean that we can miss opportunities to rest and let the fever do its work.

Many parents are concerned about the risk of febrile seizures when their children develop a fever. In fact it is the rapidity of the rise in temperature which is a factor in febrile seizures, not the fever itself. By the time you recognise your child has a fever and consider paracetamol (Calpol) the risk of seizure is usually past. In my experience constitutional factors seem to be involved too - some children in a family always seem to have a febrile seizure, where siblings do not. Some children with family history of seizures may fit at lower thresholds, but most will not, and can safely produce a high fever.

Febrile seizures are not dangerous in themselves, and studies have shown that they are not associated with long term risks. The proviso here is with infants under 3 months; if the seizure follows administration of the MMR (seizures are a listed side effect); and seizures not associated with fever - in all these cases seek medical advice without delay.

Parents also worry about a fever being "too high". It is important to understand the body's temperature regulation mechanism here. It is completely normal for a child to produce a fever up to 40.5 degrees, and in itself a fever this high is fine. It is much better to observe your child than to go by the numbers on the thermometer. There may be greater cause for concern in a clearly very poorly child with a low or moderate fever. Always seek medical advice if you are concerned about how ill your child seems to be, rather than how high the fever.

The body's temperature regulation mechanism is controlled by the hypothalamus at the base of the brain. When the hypothalamus is triggered to alter the body's thermostat (this may be due to infection, tissue damage or dehydration, for example), it can take several hours for the body to reach the new higher temperature required. During this time we may notice shivering (this produces and conserves heat), and coldness (increased muscle contraction, and constriction of blood vessels beneath the skin prevent heat loss). When the fever is no longer needed, the hypothalamus resets the body's thermostat once again, and flushing and sweating are produced to facilitate heat loss. This is what is meant by 'the fever has broken'.

This finely tuned feedback mechanism ensures that, under normal circumstances, the body does not become too hot, as excessively high temperatures (41 degrees plus) begin

to destroy body cells. Excessively high fever (hyperpyrexia) is uncommon, and is a sign of a serious underlying condition (including sepsis) which interrupts the body's normal temperature regulation mechanism, so it is important to watch a feverish child closely, and seek medical advice without delay if you are concerned.

Calpol concerns

Calpol doesn't just contain paracetamol. It is a cocktail of sweeteners, flavourings, preservatives and colourants to make the product appealing and palatable to infants. These additives include strawberry 'flavouring' and carmoisine (E122 or 'Food Red 3'- suspected carcinogen, banned in Austria, Japan, Norway, Sweden and the US) to produce its pink colour.

It also contains Maltitol (a mild laxative), glycerol (E422 - large quantities can cause headaches, thirst and nausea), sorbitol (E420 - large quantities can cause stomach upset), the paraben preservative methyl parahydroxybenzoate (E218 - suspected hormone disrupter and allergen), propyl parahydroxybenzoate (E216 - suspected hormone disrupter and allergen), ethyl parahydroxybenzoate (E214 - suspected hormone disrupter, banned in France and Australia), and a thickener xanthan gum (E415 - no known adverse effects). (Quoted from The Ecologist: 'Behind the Label')

The data suggests that frequent administration of antipyretics to children with infectious disease may lead to a worsening of their illness." (Acta Paed. Jpn 1994 Aug;36 (4) 375-378)

NICE guidelines

NICE guidelines now no longer advocate routine use of paracetamol and ibuprofen (Calpol and Nurofen) for fever reduction in children, only to alleviate distress: <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg160/chapter/1-Recommendations#antipyretic-interventions>.

Both these medicines have warnings related to harm to the stomach (ibuprofen/Nurofen) and liver (paracetamol/Calpol). Paracetamol overdose can be fatal, and there is only a narrow margin between safe and toxic levels. (NHS Nurse Bulletin 1999).

Seeking help

Signs to watch for which may need medical advice:

Fever in babies under 8 weeks over 38.5.

Fever more than 40.5 C (fever more than 41 degrees rare, but seek immediate advice).

Fever for more than 3 days (NICE guidelines now say 5 days but used to say 3 days).

Fever due to sun stroke.

Fever in patients with cardiovascular or neurological disorders.

Absence of thirst - dehydration.

If you suspect meningitis or septicaemia call 999 immediately.

Supporting the fever process naturally

Regarding homeopathic treatment, do not give remedies for fever. You will see lots of advice on the Arnica forums or elsewhere to give Aconite/Belladonna/Chamomilla to reduce fever in acute febrile illnesses. This is little better than giving Calpol (though no E numbers and parabens of course), as reducing the fever alone will reduce the effectiveness of the immune response. Homeopathy can help to shorten the duration of acute disease, by boosting the body's defences, and can make the child more comfortable, but the symptom picture needs to be matched to an appropriate remedy for the effect to be homeopathic. Seek the advice of a homeopath if your child is distressed or if you wish to boost their natural defences.

Develop a calm and confident approach to acute illness in your children, by educating yourself about disease processes and how to support and nurse your child through them. Our children are tuned into our fear and stress, which affects hormone levels, which in turn can eventually lower immunity.

Have a think about how you function at your best too, and begin to think about the support you need in your parenting. What resources do you need when your child is ill? Consider what books might be helpful to have to hand. Do you have a homeopathic first aid kit? Remember to call a like-minded friend for support. Decide when you need to seek professional medical help.

When your child is feverish, dress them in light comfortable clothing, but don't let them get cold. Tepid or cool sponging is not recommended because cooling the body artificially in this way can send a message back to the hypothalamus that the body is cold, and it will raise the core body temperature accordingly. Conversely, keeping the feet warm will encourage the body's thermostat to bring down the core temperature once the fever has done its work, as heat is dissipated through the extremities.

Fresh air and fluids are important. Keep a window open a little, even in winter. Avoid orange juice, but give warm water, home made elderberry cordial with honey (a favourite in our house!), fresh ginger tea, diluted apple juice or clear soup.

The old adage 'Feed a cold and starve a fever' is correct - the body naturally fasts when feverish, so it can focus its attention on dealing with the infection. Re-introduce foods gradually once the fever has gone, giving easily digested things to start with, and avoiding dairy products and protein rich foods. Nutritious clear soup (miso soup is especially good), or baked sweet potato or apple work well.

Rest and minimal stimulation are very important - keep sense impressions to a minimum, the nervous system is very sensitive during fever. Keep lighting low and avoid screen time. If possible, keep the room as uncluttered as you can, and bring in fresh flowers - both of these assist the healing process.

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