

## Fevers Play Key Role

A fever is not an illness itself, it's usually a sign that something's going on in your body. Fevers aren't usually bad; in fact, they seem to play a key role in helping your body fight off a number of viral and bacterial infections.

A fever occurs when your temperature rises above its normal range. What's normal for you may be a little higher or lower than the average temperature of 98.6 F. That's why it's hard to say just what qualifies as a fever. But a significant fever is usually defined as an oral temperature of 102 F, or a rectal temp of 103 F.

If you are an adult, a fever may be uncomfortable, but it usually isn't dangerous unless it rises above 103 F. For very young children and infants however, even slightly elevated temperatures may indicate a serious infection. In newborns, a subnormal temperature—rather than a fever—may be a sign of a serious illness.

Other signs and symptoms can often help identify what's causing your fever. If you have nausea and vomiting with a fever; you may have gastroenteritis, for instance. A cough that produces thick, yellow or green phlegm might be pneumonia.

If you don't know why you have a fever, don't automatically try to lower your temperature. This may only mask your symptoms and make it harder to determine the cause. In addition some experts think that aggressively treating all fevers can actually interfere with the body's immune system. That's because the viruses that cause colds and other respiratory infections like cool temperatures. By producing a low-grade fever your body may actually be helping eliminate the virus. Furthermore, most fevers go away in a relatively short time, usually a few days.

Depending on what's causing your fever; your symptoms may include sweating, shivering, headache, muscle ache, lack of appetite, dehydration and general weakness. Very high fevers between 103 F and 106 F may cause confusion, hallucinations, irritability and even convulsions.

Your body temperature is set by your hypothalamus, an area at the base of your brain that acts as a thermostat for your whole system. Even when you are well, your body temperature varies throughout the day: It's lower in the morning and higher in the late afternoon and evening. In fact your normal range can be from 97 F to 99 F. Although most people consider 98.6 F a healthy body temperature, yours may vary by a degree or more.

When a fever starts and your body tries to elevate its temperature, you feel chilly and you may shiver to generate heat. At this point, you probably wrap yourself in a thick blanket and turn up the heating pad. But eventually, as your body reaches it's new set point, you likely feel hot. When you temperature begins to return to normal you may sweat profusely, which is your body's way of dissipating your excess heat.

A fever usually means your body is responding to a viral or bacterial infection. But sometimes, heat exhaustion, or certain inflammatory conditions such as temporal arteritis—inflammation of an artery in your head—may cause a fever. Some medications, such as antibiotics and drugs used to treat hypertension or seizures, may do the same. In rare instances a malignant tumor and some forms of kidney cancer may be the cause.

In children, viral infections, strep throat and ear infections (otitis media) are the most common causes of fever. Some infants and children develop fevers after receiving routine immunizations, such as the diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis (DTP) vaccine.

Sometimes it is just not possible to identify the cause of a fever. In that case the diagnosis may be a fever of unknown origin.