

Febrile convulsion in children

Emergency Department factsheets



What is a febrile convulsion?

A febrile convulsion is a seizure or fit that occurs with fever, usually in children under five years of age. The fever may not be obvious before the fit, as it usually comes on very quickly.

Most fits last less than two minutes, but can range from a few seconds to up to 15 minutes. The child is usually drowsy afterwards.

Seizures generally happen in children aged from six months to six years of age. Febrile convulsions are very common; about one in 25 children will have one.

What is fever?

Fever is the body's normal response to an infection and is usually harmless. For a child, this occurs when the body temperature reaches above 38°C. A high temperature does not necessarily mean that your child has a serious illness.

If your child has a fever:

- keep them cool by not overdressing them or having their room too hot
- give them plenty to drink (it is best to give small frequent drinks, or sips, of water)
- give paracetamol (such as Panadol or Dymadon) or ibuprofen (such as Nurofen) only if your child has pain or is miserable
- carefully check the label for the correct dose and make sure you are not giving your child any other products containing Paracetamol or Ibuprofen (such as some cough medicines and cold and flu preparations)
- do not use fanning or tepid sponging/baths as they may cause shivering and actually increase temperature.

What causes a febrile convulsion?

The exact mechanism behind febrile convulsions is unknown. It may be due to sudden changes in body temperature, immaturity of the brain, the body's response to the underlying illness through the immune system or some genetic factors (they can tend to run in families).

What we do know is that, in general, children have a lower seizure threshold than adults. This means that they are more prone to convulsions.

Febrile convulsions tend to happen when there is a sudden rise in body temperature. The cause of the fever is usually a viral illness, with certain viruses being more common for inducing febrile convulsions. Trying to treat the fever (such as by giving paracetamol) will not prevent a febrile convulsion.

What are the symptoms?

A febrile convulsion can be very frightening for parents and observers to witness. The signs and symptoms usually include:

- loss of consciousness (a 'blackout')
- twitching or jerking of arms and legs
- difficulty breathing and/or foaming at the mouth
- going pale or blue in colour
- the eyes rolling back so only the whites are visible
- your child may take up to 30 minutes to wake up properly afterwards. They may be irritable during this time and appear not to recognise you.

What should I do if my child has a fit?

- Stay calm and do not panic.
- There is nothing you can do to make the convulsion stop.
- Do not force or put anything into the child's mouth, including your fingers.
- Ensure your child is safe by placing them on the floor and removing any objects that they could hit against.
- Note the time the fit started and stopped, to tell the doctor.
- Once the fit has stopped place your child on their side and make them comfortable.
- Do not shake or slap your child to wake them up.
- Do not restrain your child.
- Do not put a child who is having a convulsion in the bath.
- Have your child checked by your local doctor or health care professional as soon as possible.
- If the fit lasts longer than five minutes or if you are very worried call an ambulance (dial 000).

What can you do to prevent febrile convulsions?

Unfortunately, as febrile convulsion may be the first sign of illness in your child, it is not always possible to take steps to prevent them. If your child has a fever you may use some simple techniques to make them feel better.

- Paracetamol (Panadol) or Ibuprofen (Nurofen) may help to reduce their temperature and make them feel a little better but unfortunately has NOT been shown to prevent febrile seizures.
- Avoid overdressing your child.

- Avoid sponging and cold baths that may cool your child too rapidly.

What to expect

- Children suffer no pain or discomfort during a fit.
- A febrile convulsion is not epilepsy. No regular medication is needed.
- A short fit will not cause brain damage. Even a long fit almost never causes harm.
- Children who have febrile convulsions normally grow up healthy and do not have any permanent damage from seizures.
- One in three babies and children who have had one febrile convulsion will have another. Some children will never have a seizure or have only one in their lifetime. There is no way of predicting who will be affected or when this will happen.
- Children usually have fewer seizures as they get older, and most seizures stop completely by the age of six.

Seeking help

In a medical emergency, go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).

See your local doctor or health care professional if the condition is not improving or keeps coming back. For other medical problems see your local doctor or health-care professional.

13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) provides health information, referral and teletriage services to the public in all parts of Queensland and is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year for the cost of a local call*.

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