

Choosing the Right Thermometer to Take your Child's Temperature

A glass mercury thermometer was once a staple of medicine cabinets. Because it can break and allow mercury to vaporize and be inhaled, it is no longer recommended. Today, digital thermometers are the standard choice to measure body temperature.

If you have no children less than 4 years of age, the choice is usually quite simple: use a regular digital thermometer for the entire family to measure temperature orally. It gets a little complicated when you have children less than 4 years of age because taking the temperature orally requires holding the thermometer under the tongue with lips closed—something very young children are not well-suited to do.

TYPES OF THERMOMETERS

There are four types:

- **Regular digital thermometers:**
These use electronic heat sensors to record body temperature. They can be used in the mouth, rectum or armpit. Temperature taken in the armpit is least accurate.
- **Digital ear thermometers:**
These use an infrared ray to measure the temperature inside the ear canal. Earwax or small, curved ear canal can interfere with their accuracy.
- **Digital pacifier thermometer:**
These use a pacifier nipple to house the thermometer. They measure the mouth temperature. They are less accurate than the first two types.
- **Temporal artery thermometers:**
These use an infrared scanner to measure the temperature of the temporal artery in the forehead. Their reliability hasn't yet been thoroughly assessed.

Which is the best option?

The right thermometer for your child depends on their age.

Up to 3 months: You have only one choice. Use a regular digital thermometer to take the temperature in the rectum. Make sure to lubricate the tip of the thermometer with petroleum jelly. Lay your baby on his or her back, lift your baby's thighs and insert the lubricated thermometer $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 inch (1.3 to 2.5 centimeters) into your baby's rectum. Stop if you feel any resistance.

3 months to 4 years: For older infants and toddlers you can again use a regular digital thermometer to take the temperature rectally. If you're not comfortable with taking the temperature rectally, you can use any one of the other types of thermometers listed above, ear thermometers being your best choice.

4 years and older: As mentioned earlier, if you have no children under the age of 4, a regular digital thermometer can be used orally for the entire family. If however, your child is too congested to breathe through his or her nose, you may need to use a digital ear thermometer or take the temperature rectally with a regular digital thermometer.

Whichever method you use, make sure you carefully read the instructions that came with your thermometer. After each use, clean the tip of the thermometer with rubbing alcohol or soap and lukewarm water.

If you use a regular digital thermometer rectally, make sure to get another one for oral use. Label the two thermometers carefully, making sure not to use the same thermometer in both places.