Febrile convulsions

Seeing your child have a febrile convolution can be frightening. But there's usually nothing to worry about. In most cases, febrile convulsions are over quickly, and the child recovers completely.

We've brought together the best and most up-to-date research about febrile convulsions to see what treatments work. You can use our information to talk to your doctor and decide which treatments are best for your child.

What happens?

Febrile convulsions are quite common in babies and young children. They are brief convulsions, or fits, that happen because your child has a fever (a high temperature).

Lots of illnesses can cause a fever. The fevers that most commonly cause a febrile convolution come from ear infections and tonsillitis. Some vaccines can cause a rise in temperature as a side effect. Rarely, this can trigger a febrile convolution.

Children can get febrile convulsions from when they are a few months old. There are different types of convulsions. This information is about simple febrile convulsions.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms can be alarming. Your child's body twitches or shakes, and your child loses consciousness. They won't look at you or react to your voice. They may foam at the mouth, vomit, or wet or soil themselves.

Most children who have a simple febrile convolution twitch or shake evenly on both sides of their body. Or they may go rigid, holding their arms and legs stiffly. It will be over in a couple of minutes.

If one side of your child's body twitches harder, or if the convolution lasts more than five minutes, they may be having a complex febrile convolution. These are more serious. If your child gets these symptoms, take them to see their doctor or to hospital, or call 999 for an ambulance.

Children often go into a very deep sleep after their convolution.

What to do

If your child has a convolution:

• Check the time. It's useful if you can tell your doctor how long the convolution lasted. If it goes on for more than five minutes, you should get medical help
• Roll the child onto their left side
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• For babies, cradle them in your arms, on their side, with their feet slightly higher than their head
• If your child vomits, clear it away from their mouth so they don't choke. But don't put anything in your child's mouth
• If your child twitches, check whether one or both sides of their body move. If one side jerks more, tell the doctor. Try to remember which side.

If it's the first time your child has had a convolution, take them to the doctor or to hospital, or call 999 for an ambulance.

If your child has had a febrile convolution before, they may not need to see a doctor. But always get medical help if you're worried. If your child has already had one febrile convolution in the last 24 hours, or if they have another in the next 24 hours, get medical help.

What treatments work?

Most febrile convulsions are over quickly, and don't need any treatment. Some medicines have been tried to prevent febrile convulsions, but there's no good evidence to show they work.

Febrile convulsions are caused by a fever (a high temperature). The painkillers paracetamol and ibuprofen can reduce the fever. But there's not enough evidence to say if they can prevent convulsions.

You can buy these drugs as syrups from a chemist. Brand names include Calpol and Calprofen. Paracetamol can be used for children 3 months and older and ibuprofen for children 6 months and older. If your child has a fever, painkillers may make your child feel better.

Ibuprofen sometimes causes an upset stomach. Paracetamol is less likely to cause side effects. But paracetamol can cause severe liver damage if your child takes too much. This can be bad enough to kill. Make sure you don't give your child more than the recommended dose.

Doctors sometimes try drugs called anticonvulsants to prevent children who've had several febrile convulsions from having more. Some anticonvulsants may help with this, but they're not usually recommended. Not all the research shows that they help. Also, they often cause side effects, like hyperactivity (being overactive), tiredness, irritability, and speech, movement and sleeping problems.

What will happen?

A doctor will look for the infection that caused the febrile convolution. Your child may need treatment for the infection. If your doctor can't see signs of an infection, they may take a urine sample or blood test.

The doctor might send your child to hospital for a short while, to be kept an eye on. This is more likely if your child is very young.

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Your child will also need to go to hospital if the doctor thinks they might have meningitis. Meningitis can sometimes cause a convulsion. It's a serious illness, but it's quite rare in children with febrile convulsions.

Children recover completely from a simple febrile convolution. But if your child has had one convolution, they may have another. Children have about a 1 in 3 chance of a second convolution if they get a fever in future.

Febrile convulsions don't cause any problems with children's learning or development. Children who've had convulsions do just as well at school as other children. They usually grow out of them by 5 or 6 years of age.

If a child has a febrile convolution, they have a slightly higher risk of getting epilepsy in later life. Epilepsy is a serious condition where people get repeated convulsions. But this is rare. Only about 1 in 100 healthy children who have had a febrile convolution go on to get epilepsy.

This information is aimed at a UK patient audience. This information however does not replace medical advice. If you have a medical problem please see your doctor. Please see our full Conditions of Use for this content http://besttreatments.bmj.com/btuk/about/12.html.