Fever in Children: Recognising the Seriously Ill Child

Quick-reference for community pharmacists · Aligned with NICE NG143

CALL 999: Immediately Life-Threatening

- ☐ Non-blanching rash: possible meningococcal disease; call 999 immediately
- ☐ Pale, mottled, ashen, or blue skin or lips with shock, collapse, or unresponsiveness
- ☐ Active seizure lasting more than 5 minutes
- ☐ Grunting, severe chest indrawing, or obvious respiratory distress

Do not delay 999 to give paracetamol or ibuprofen. Do not wait for a rash in a severely unwell child.

REFER: Face-to-Face Paediatric Review Within 2 Hours

- ☐ Under 3 months + temperature 38°C or above: HIGH RISK regardless of appearance
- ☐ Bulging fontanelle; neck stiffness; reduced skin turgor
- ☐ Weak, high-pitched, or continuous cry; does not wake or will not stay awake
- ☐ Focal seizure, focal neurological signs, or incomplete recovery after seizure
- ☐ Respiratory rate above 60 breaths per minute

SAME-DAY: Face-to-Face Clinical Assessment

- ☐ Age 3 to 6 months + temperature 39°C or above
- ☐ Fever 5 or more days (consider Kawasaki disease)
- ☐ Not responding normally; no smile; wakes only with prolonged stimulation
- ☐ Poor feeding; reduced wet nappies; limb swelling; not using an extremity
- ☐ Rigors; tachycardia; tachypnoea; O2 saturation 95% or below if known
- ☐ Seizure now stopped (same-day unless focal, prolonged, or child drowsy/unwell)

Parental concern is a valid clinical signal. Urgency depends on severity and parental concern (NICE NG143).

Traffic Light Features at a Glance

Feature	Green: reassuring	Amber/Red: concern
Age + temp	Over 6 months, mild fever, well	Under 3 months + 38°C: RED. Age 3-6 months + 39°C: AMBER
Skin/rash	Pink; blanching rash fades under glass	Pale/mottled/blue = urgent. Non-blanching = call 999
Alertness	Responds, smiles, wakes easily	No response; cannot be roused; will not stay awake
Cry/neck	Strong cry; neck moves freely	Weak/high-pitched cry; stiff neck; bulging fontanelle

FEVER Counter Assessment Framework

F	**Face and colour**	Pale, mottled, or blue? Quiet and disinterested? A child not looking around is already telling you something.
E	**Eyes and alertness**	Eye contact? Responding to parent? Smiling? Does not wake or will not stay awake is a red feature.
V	**Vital concerns from parent**	What specifically worries them? Dramatic change in behaviour? Parental concern is a valid clinical signal.
E	**Extremities and rash**	Any rash? Non-blanching under glass = call 999. Limb swelling or refusing to use an arm or leg?
R	**Refer without hesitation**	Red or amber feature? Under 3 months with temperature 38°C or above? Escalate rather than reassure.

Key reminders: Temperature response to paracetamol does not indicate non-serious illness (NICE NG143 1.4.8). Antipyretics do not prevent febrile convulsions (NICE NG143 1.6.1). Never give aspirin to a child under 16. Sources: NICE NG143 Fever in under 5s; NICE NG254; NHS aspirin advice; BNFc.

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