

# Taking temperatures

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

- To be aware that body temperature is a useful indication of a person's health
- To recognise normal and abnormal body temperature
- To understand that a raised temperature can be a symptom of an infection and that it may be appropriate to seek medical advice



## RESOURCES

- A selection of different thermometers for checking body temperature, including plastic strip and digital thermometers
- Colour copies of Resources 1 and 2

## RELATED THEMES

- NHS Direct (pages 73–81)
- NHS Direct website (pages 82–90)
- Telephone helplines (pages 91–109)

### HEALTH SKILLS

A high body temperature is an indicator of many different medical conditions. Knowing what 'normal' body temperature is can be particularly useful to anybody with responsibility for looking after young children or the elderly. Learners should be encouraged to call NHS Direct where a nurse will advise whether you need medical attention.

#### Related health information

<http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk/selfhelp/guide/SHGAlphaIndex.aspx?selectedLetter=T>

### SKILLS FOR LIFE

In order to make a decision about whether to seek medical advice because of a person's feverish, unwell condition, it helps to be able to take, read and interpret that person's temperature from a thermometer. The numeracy skills needed to do this are:

- reading a scale on a thermometer
- comparing temperatures – normal and raised.

#### Core curriculum

Activities in this theme will contribute to learning in the following curriculum area:

- read a scale on a thermometer and compare temperatures (NMS1/E3.9).

- Ask learners about the signs that somebody is ill (feel hot / cold, weak, aching, faint / dizzy, headache, sore throat, feel sick, etc.). Ask what they notice about other people who are not well (look hot and red, pale, tired, sleepy, miserable, distracted, etc.).
- Ask why you might put your hand to a child's forehead to check their temperature (the child is unusually quiet / restless, whining, looks hot and unwell, sweating / feverish). Discuss what could be the cause of a higher-than-normal temperature (a cold, teething, flu / tonsillitis, start of childhood illness like chicken pox, etc.).
- Discuss how you would observe a child you know is unwell, and how this differs from an adult (babies and small children cannot generally tell you about their symptoms, whereas most adults can describe how they feel and can often decide what to do about it – providing their condition does not deteriorate suddenly).
- Ask what experience learners have of checking temperature. Show examples of different types of thermometer (e.g. digital thermometer, forehead thermometer, etc.). Demonstrate how to take a person's temperature using the different types.
- Discuss the standard scale used in the UK: degrees Celsius, usually written as °C. Can learners find this scale on the thermometers?
- Ask learners to look at the scale. Can they find the position that indicates 'normal' body temperature? (Around 37 °Celsius.)
- Point out the importance of knowing the temperature that is normal for you or your child.
- If learners are happy to do so, get them to practise reading another person's temperature.
- Discuss the difference between a 'normal' temperature and an 'abnormal' one – this difference may be small. Set up pairs or small groups to discuss these questions:
  - Would you be worried if your partner's temperature was one degree higher than their 'normal' body temperature?
  - What if it was three degrees higher than normal?
  - What about a baby?
- Take feedback.
- Point out that as an observer you also need to take account of whether a person is reacting to everyday stimuli (are they so feverish that they notice very little?); whether they are eating or drinking; whether there are any other signs of illness (e.g. sickness and diarrhoea, headaches, etc.); how long they've had the symptoms; their age and vulnerability (e.g. baby, child under three, older person, infirm, etc.).
- Stress the need to observe someone who seems to have a raised temperature, and to start trying to reduce it straight away – not waiting to see if it develops. A child's fever – if it has not exceeded 38.8 °C – can be reduced by means such as cool drinks, rest, removing excess clothing, tepid sponging / baths, and age-appropriate medicine.
- Discuss with learners who they would call for advice or help if they were really worried about someone with a high temperature (GP, NHS Direct, go to Emergency Department).
- Summarise by looking together at Resource 1.

*What signs or symptoms do you have if you're not feeling well?*

*How can you check a person's temperature?*

*If you're worried about someone's temperature, who could you call for help and advice?*

## ACTIVITY 1

## Read and interpret temperatures

- Introduce Resource 2 and discuss when it would be necessary to take someone's temperature (e.g. a child who has been running around for half an hour and then feels sick; a child who is not hungry; a baby who is teething; an elderly person who feels unwell and has stayed in bed for two days). Use scenarios that are meaningful and relevant to the group.
- Ask learners to read the temperatures and decide if they are higher than the normal body temperature. This will reveal whether they can read and compare temperature scales. Point out that many plastic strip thermometers show the temperature with the colour green, as on Resource 2. However, the colours blue and orange / brown often appear just before / after the green.
- Interpreting the results of their findings will remain a much more challenging task, because it will depend on the situation at the time. Encourage learners to ask themselves in this situation: 'So what shall I do?'
- Ask learners in pairs or small groups to think about
  - a) situations in which they would probably phone NHS Direct or their GP practice (e.g. a small child crying continuously; a baby with diarrhoea and vomiting; an elderly, frail person).
  - b) situations in which they would wait to see if the person improved before calling the GP practice (e.g. a normally healthy 25-year-old with a heavy cold; an adult 'brewing' a cold or flu with aching limbs and shivering; a baby who is obviously teething).
- Take feedback and summarise by emphasising that if someone has a raised temperature they may be unwell, and that for the most part the person will feel like that whilst they have the infection (or changes in their body, like teething, are taking place). They will then begin to get better and the temperature will return to normal. However, stress that if they are ever in any doubt about whether it is serious enough to need a doctor, they can phone NHS Direct or their GP practice and ask for advice – they are not being a nuisance! (Going to the Emergency Department first with a raised temperature, without asking advice, *is* being a nuisance, however!)

*What might cause a temperature to be higher than normal?*

*In which situations would you probably call NHS Direct or your GP practice?*

*In which situations would you probably wait and see if the person improves?*

### Support

- Check learners understand how temperature is shown by the change of colour on a plastic strip thermometer. Make sure they realise that the colour green does not necessarily mean that the temperature is OK or normal.
- Make sure learners understand that they are comparing temperatures against 'normal' body temperature.

### ESOL

- Discuss words and expressions for explaining symptoms and signs of fever (e.g. 'he's got a high temperature'; 'he's feverish / he's got a fever'; 'I've checked her temperature'; 'she feels hot'). Display these and suggest that learners record them in personal glossaries.
- Check learners know how to verbalise temperatures.
- Encourage learners to work in pairs to practise the new expressions as short dialogues (e.g. 'Have you taken his temperature?' 'Yes, it's thirty-eight point nine.').

### TIP

Point out the order of numbers on a thermometer and check understanding of decimals.

### Action

- Suggest that learners practise taking their temperature using different kinds of thermometers.
- Encourage learners to buy a thermometer they feel confident to use at home, or ask them to research the prices of different ones and compare 'best buys' at the next session.
- Suggest they stick a little reminder onto their medicine cabinet at home which says that 37 °C is **normal** temperature.

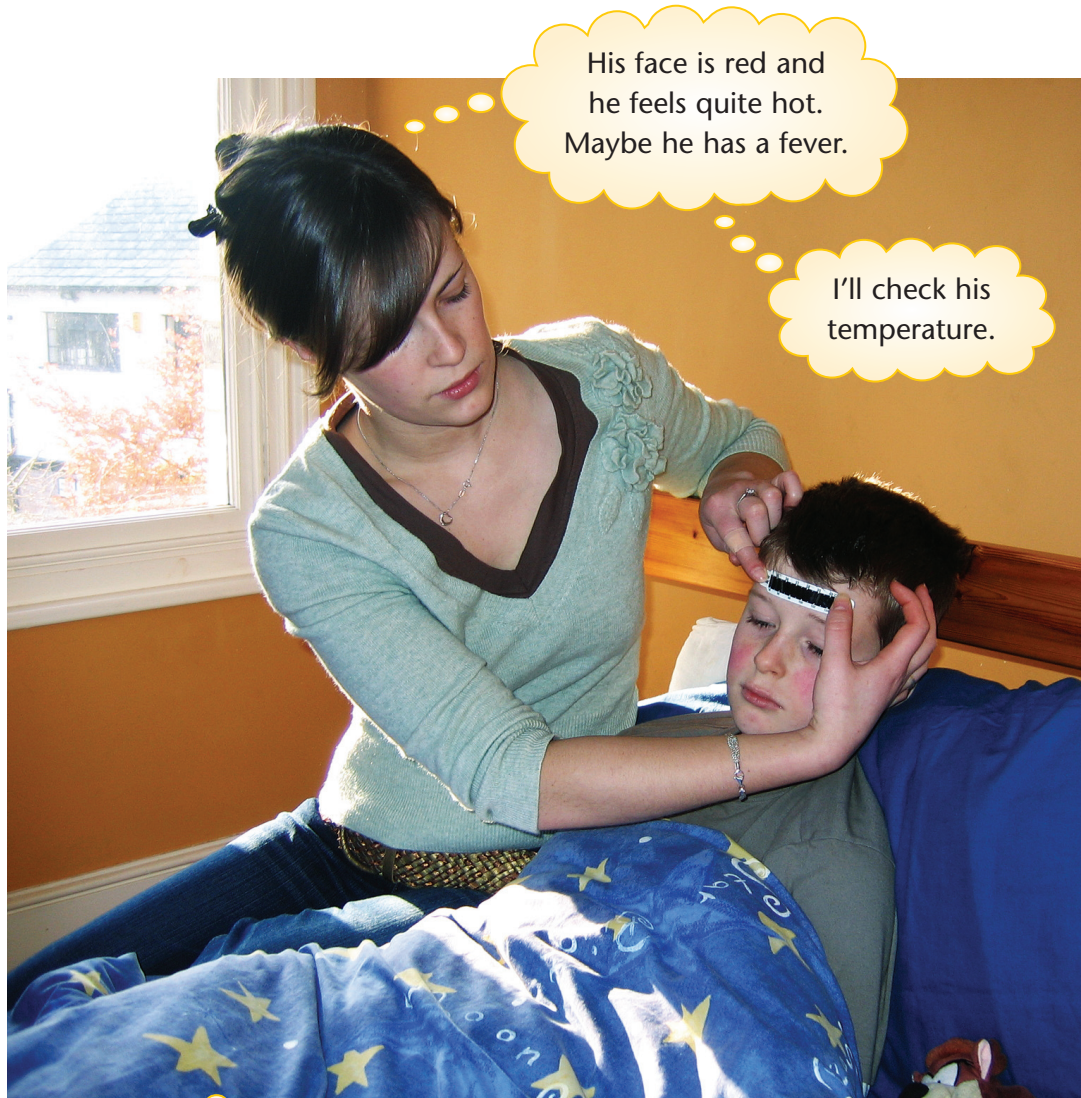
*Which thermometer do you prefer?*



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## RESOURCE 1

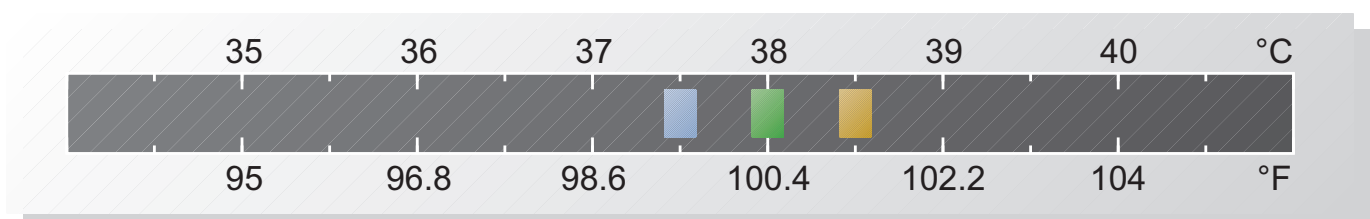
Temperature can tell us about a person's health.



What is normal?

Is it a bit high?

What shall I do?



# Taking temperatures

RESOURCE 2

1 Tick the reading for normal body temperature.

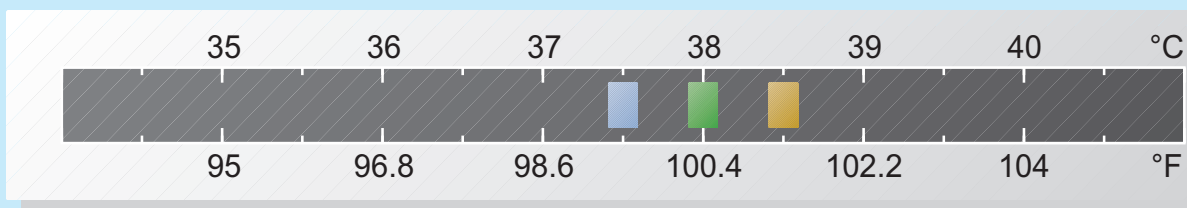
35°C

40°C

39°C

37°C

2

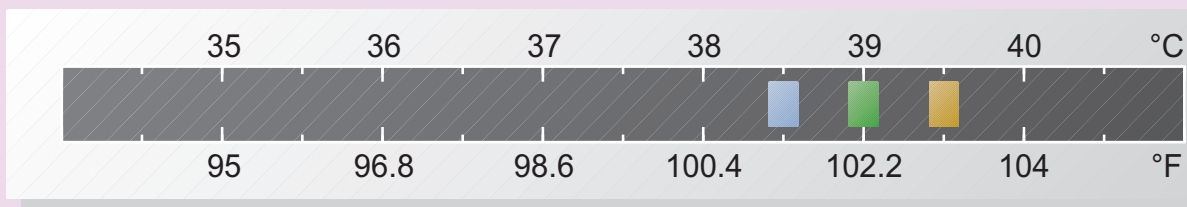


Is this temperature high?

Yes

No

3

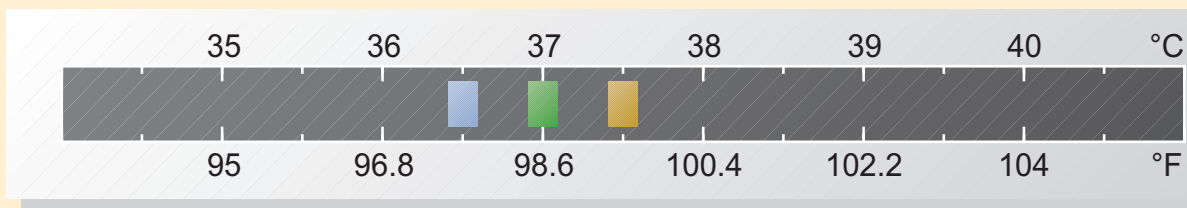


Is this temperature high?

Yes

No

4



Is this temperature high?

Yes

No

There are no audio scripts for this theme.

## ACTIVITY 1 / Resource 2

- 1 37 °C
- 2 Yes – this temperature (38 °C) is high.
- 3 Yes – this temperature (39 °C) is high.
- 4 No – this temperature (37 °C) is normal.