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Date written: March 2010
Last revised: March 2013
Review date: April 2016
Version: 2.1
Code: PI0402

What is a febrile convulsion?

A febrile convulsion is a seizure (or fit) that occurs in some children with a high temperature (fever). The vast majority of febrile convulsions are not serious, although they may be quite upsetting for parents to witness. Most occur with common illnesses such as ear infections and colds. Full recovery with no permanent damage is normal. The main treatment is aimed at the illness that caused the fever.

What causes a febrile convulsion and who has them?

Any illness that causes a fever can cause a febrile convulsion. Most occur with common illnesses such as ear infections, coughs, colds, flu, and other viral infections. Serious infections such as pneumonia, kidney infections or meningitis are less common causes.

About 3 in 100 children have a febrile seizure sometime before their 6th birthday. They most commonly occur between the ages of 18 months and three years. They are rare in children under 6 months and over the age of 6 years.

Most children with febrile convulsions only ever have one fit. A few children will have one or more seizures, usually during illnesses which cause a fever. There is no increased risk of epilepsy in children who have febrile convulsions.

What are the signs and symptoms?

During a febrile convulsion:

- your child usually loses consciousness.
- their muscles may stiffen or jerk.
- your child may go red or blue in the face.
- the convulsion may last for several minutes.
- then the movements stop, and the child regains consciousness but remains sleepy or irritated afterwards.

What first aid should I give for a febrile convulsion?

- the most important thing is to stay calm - don't panic.
- place your child on their side with their head in line with the body or slightly lower (the recovery position).
- do not put anything into their mouth or shake the child. Your child will not choke or swallow their tongue.

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- time how long the convulsion lasts.
- try to watch exactly what happens, so that you can describe it later.

When should I call for an ambulance?

Call for an ambulance on 999 if:

- the convulsion lasts more than 5 minutes.
- your child does not wake up when the convulsion stops.
- your child looks very unwell when the convulsion stops.

What to do for your child after a febrile convulsion?

- your child should be seen by a doctor as soon as possible after a seizure for a check to rule out serious illness.
- no treatment is usually needed for the seizure itself if it stops within a few minutes. However, treatment may be needed for the infection causing the fever.
- since a fever is the body's natural response to infection it is not always necessary to reduce a fever. Treatment of a fever with paracetamol or ibuprofen does not prevent a febrile convulsion. However, if your child is irritable with a fever, paracetamol or ibuprofen may make them feel more comfortable. Please check the packet for the appropriate dose to give your child.
- occasionally children who have long convulsions (longer than a few minutes) need to be watched in hospital for a while afterwards. This is usually to find the cause of the fever and watch the course of your child's illness.
- put your child to sleep at the usual time, in his or her own bed. Don't worry about whether you will hear a convulsion; a bed or cot is a safe place for a convulsion.

If a seizure lasts for longer than five minutes a doctor or paramedic may give medication to stop the seizure.

Sometimes the parents of children who are prone to recurrent febrile seizures are taught how to use one of these medicines. They are then given a supply in case a further febrile seizure occurs.

Follow up

- 3 in 100 children will have a febrile convulsion. Only one seizure occurs in most cases. In less than a third, a second seizure occurs with a future feverish illness. A future febrile seizure is more likely if the first occurs in a child younger than 15 months, or if there is a family history of febrile seizures in close relatives (father, mother, sister, brother). Once the child is past 3 years old, the chance of a recurrence becomes much less likely.
- most children who have febrile convulsions do not have any long term health problems. They are normally healthy and grow out of them by the age of 6.