

Life Hacks: Taking Your Body Temperature

Knowing your “normal” is one more way to stay well.

By now, we all know what we need to do to slow the spread of COVID-19:

- Wear a mask that covers your nose and mouth
- Keep your hands clean and off your face
- Physical distance
- Stay home whenever possible

Maureen Fagan, D.N.P., F.N.P.-B.C., F.A.A.N., wants to add another tool to your at-home prevention toolbox: the humble thermometer. As the Chief Nursing Executive at the University of Miami Health System, Dr. Fagan has taken thousands of temperatures over her career. In some cases now, fever is an early indicator of coronavirus. “Between 19 to 24% of those testing positive for COVID-19 run a fever,” Dr. Fagan says.

From her perspective, every adult should know their standard, baseline temperature. “It’s part of knowing your body well.” Now, more than ever, it’s empowering to become better acquainted with your body and care about your health.

Your normal temperature may not be typical for someone else.

“Actually, 98.6°F was considered average and not the norm for everyone. The (medical) literature says that most people are in the 97°F to 99°F range,” she says.

To know your average body temperature, check it often. To familiarize yourself with your regular body temperature fluctuations, take it first thing in the morning before you get out of bed, go to the bathroom, eat breakfast, or take medication. Record the readings for one month. A graph will help you see your normal range pictorially. This helps you understand your normal temperature.”

After a month, you’ll reap several benefits:

Knowing your body temperature allows you to communicate better with your health care providers.

If you usually run hot or cold, understand that slightly higher or lower body temperature doesn’t necessarily mean you’re becoming ill.

You will recognize the early stages of infection when rest and/or treatment is the most effective.

If you suspect you have a fever because you feel warm to the touch, take your temperature. In this way, you’ll recognize the achiness and warmth that come at a specific temperature. The purpose is not to skip taking your body temperature the next time you feel ill, but to see how you feel with the objective temperature measurement. This helps you identify what your temperature is during illness.

How do you take someone’s temperature?

Though Dr. Fagan used a glass thermometer in the early years of her nursing career, a digital thermometer is safer, more convenient. The digital versions are

recommended by doctors who care for adults and children. Don't eat or drink anything hot or cold before taking your temperature. To use a digital thermometer, first, choose to read it in Fahrenheit or Celsius temperature, then clear it back to zero. To do this, turn it on, press to the Fahrenheit or "F" setting, and press again until you see "F - -" or an empty screen," Dr. Fagan says. If you chose Celsius, use the same approach but chose "C" instead. Slip the stick under your tongue. When it beeps (in about a minute), you're ready to read.

If you need to take your child's temperature

A calm child produces a more accurate reading. It's not easy to calm or distract a fussy or squirming child, but give it your best try. "I taught my kids to look me in the eyes, hold still, watch me take a deep breath, and then blow it out slowly," Dr. Fagan says. "Temperature taking was part of my children's first aid training. I gave each of them a travel kit with a thermometer." She brings up an important point.

Just as everyone needs their own toothbrush, each family member needs their own thermometer, if that is possible. On another note, while an underarm measurement might be easier to perform on a child, it's not as accurate as under the tongue. From birth to three years of age, a rectal temperature is the recommended method. Your pediatrician or nurse can teach you the correct way to take a rectal temperature. A tympanic touch thermometer is also fine for children, as long as you change the tip with each use.

What factors affect body temperature?

Illness isn't the only reason your core temperature may run hot or cold. "Outdoor activities, weather, and type of clothing all play into it, as do seasonal allergies, which cause inflammation." Infections may spike a fever (defined as an oral temperature of 100.4°F in children and adults) because "your body is ramping up to

protect you by trying to kill a germ or something your immune system recognizes as not belonging there.” When women ovulate, their temperature may rise up to .4 of a degree higher and stay higher until they get their menses. Low temperatures can stem from several causes, including diabetes, thyroid disorders, alcohol or drug use, infections, or going into shock.

If you run a fever and feel bad enough to seek urgent or emergency care, Dr. Fagan advises against taking aspirin, Tylenol, or Motrin. Fever reducers interfere with a nurse’s ability to get an accurate body temperature reading.

Are public temperature scans effective?

You may have recently been in a public place where an attendant scanned your forehead with an infrared temperature scanner. The efficacy of this technology is questionable. “I’ve seen wide swings in the numbers produced by public temperature screenings. It’s a ballpark figure and does not identify asymptomatic individuals or those with symptoms besides fever,” Dr. Fagan says. However, infrared scanners do raise awareness of the need to take precautions and might catch some of the COVID-19 carriers who run a fever.

Your best defense against the virus, says Dr. Fagan is to follow the safety guidelines created by public health experts.

“Public health officials may not share your same political beliefs, but they have a systematic way of understanding the infectious disease problem and protecting your health,” she says.

Beyond that, take control of your health by taking your temperature and adopting healthy habits.

There has never been a better time to get to know your body.

Nancy Moreland is a contributing writer for UMiami Health News.

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Research and public health experts agree that wearing a mask is the best way to stop the spread of COVID-19. This Q&A gives you the specifics from how to wear them properly and how to keep your glasses from fogging up. Read more.

Preparing for COVID-19 and a hurricane



In addition to the typical hurricane prep, this year, we need to plan for worst-case

scenarios. What if COVID-19 hits you or a member of your household before or after a hurricane hits our area?