

How to Take an Oral Temperature Measurement

Failure to obtain an accurate temperature can result in improper treatment. The validity of temperature comparisons is greatest when the thermometer type and measurement location are consistent. Caution should be taken when identifying trends or comparing temperatures obtained using different methods.

The purpose of measuring body temperature is to obtain a representative average temperature of core body tissues. Although no individual peripheral site correlates exactly with core temperature, a site near a major artery gives the most accurate measurement. Sites reflecting core temperature (e.g. rectum, tympanic membrane, esophagus, pulmonary artery, and urinary bladder) are more reliable indicators of body temperature than sites reflecting surface temperature (e.g. skin, oral cavity, and axilla). Rectal temperature measurement is thought to reflect core body temperature most closely. However, since rectal temperatures are not routinely performed on adult patients, the oral site is the preferred consistent location. For oral temperatures, the sublingual pocket in the mouth is close to the sublingual artery. The probe should be placed under the tongue in the posterior sublingual pocket lateral to the center of the lower jaw. The normal range for oral temperature is 36.2°C - 37.7°C (97.2°F - 99.9°F).

Procedure

1. Introduce yourself to the patient and verify the correct patient using two identifiers.
2. Determine the previous baseline temperature and measurement site from the patient's record.
3. Assess the patient for signs and symptoms of temperature alteration.
4. Wait 20 to 30 minutes after the patient smokes, eats, or drinks a hot or cold liquid. Consider delaying temperature assessment for one hour after delivery or any strenuous activity.
5. Obtain an oral thermometer device. If the patient is on isolation precautions, use a disposable thermometer.
6. Perform hand hygiene and wear gloves.
7. Explain the procedure to the patient and obtain verbal consent.
8. Remove the oral thermometer probe from the electronic thermometer housing unit. Grasp the top of the probe stem, being careful not to apply pressure on the ejection button. Slide the disposable cover over the temperature probe until it locks in place.
9. Ask the patient to open his or her mouth. Gently place the temperature probe under the tongue in the posterior sublingual pocket lateral to the center of the lower jaw.
10. Instruct the patient to hold the temperature probe with lips closed.
11. Leave the temperature probe in place until an audible tone indicates completion and the patient's temperature reading appears on the digital display. Remove the probe from under the patient's tongue.
12. Push the ejection button on the temperature probe to discard the probe cover into the proper trash receptacle.
13. Wipe the probe with approved cleaner, paying attention to ridges where the probe stem connects to the top. Avoid touching the probe cover to reduce the transmission of microorganisms.
14. Insert the temperature probe back into the housing unit.
15. Disinfect the thermometer with approved equipment cleaner.
16. Discard supplies, remove gloves, and perform hand hygiene.
17. Inform the patient of the temperature reading, if appropriate.
18. Return the thermometer to its assigned storage space.
19. Report abnormal findings to the provider.
20. Document the procedure in the electronic health record

For illustration and other information, please see Clinical nursing skills & techniques by Perry, A.G., Potter, P.A., & Ostendorf, W. (2018). St. Louis, MO: Elsevier