

# Sicknesses that Are Often Confused

## CHAPTER

## 2

## WHAT CAUSES SICKNESS?

Persons from different countries or backgrounds have different ways to explain what causes sickness.

*A baby gets diarrhea. But why?*

**People in small villages** may say it is because the parents did something wrong, or perhaps because they made a god or spirit angry.

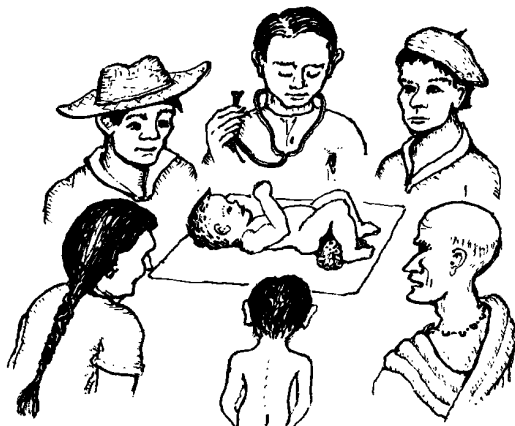
**A doctor** may say it is because the child has an infection.

**A public health officer** may say it is because the villagers do not have a good water system or use latrines.

**A social reformer** may say the unhealthy conditions that lead to frequent childhood diarrhea are caused by an unfair distribution of land and wealth.

**A teacher** may place the blame on lack of education.

People see the cause of sickness in terms of their own experience and point of view. Who then is right about the cause? Possibly everyone is right, or partly right. This is because...



**Sickness usually results from a combination of causes.**



“Why my child?”

Each of the causes suggested above may be a part of the reason why a baby gets diarrhea.

To prevent and treat sickness successfully, it helps to have as full an understanding as possible about the common sicknesses in your area and the combination of things that causes them.

In this book, different sicknesses are discussed mostly according to the systems and terms of modern or scientific medicine.

**To make good use of this book, and safe use of the medicines it recommends, you will need some understanding of sicknesses and their causes according to medical science.** Reading this chapter may help.

DIFFERENT KINDS OF SICKNESSES AND THEIR CAUSES

When considering how to prevent or treat different sicknesses, it helps to think of them in two groups: infectious and non-infectious.

**Infectious diseases** are those that spread from one person to another. Healthy persons must be protected from people with these sicknesses.

**Non-Infectious diseases** do not spread from person to person. They have other causes. Therefore, it is important to know which sicknesses are infectious and which are not.

Non-infectious Diseases

Non-infectious diseases have many different causes. But they are never caused by germs, bacteria, or other living organisms that attack the body. They never spread from one person to another. It is important to realize that *antibiotics*, or medicines that fight germs (see p. 55), do not help cure non-infectious diseases.

Remember: Antibiotics are of no use for non-infectious diseases.

EXAMPLES OF NON-INFECTIOUS DISEASES

<b>Problems caused by something that wears out or goes wrong within the body:</b>  rheumatism heart attack epileptic seizures stroke migraine headaches cataract cancer	<b>Problems caused by something from outside that harms or troubles the body:</b>  allergies asthma poisons snakebite cough from smoking stomach ulcer alcoholism	<b>Problems caused by a lack of something the body needs:</b>  malnutrition anemia pellagra night blindness and xerophthalmia goiter and hypothyroidism cirrhosis of the liver (part of the cause)
<b>Problems people are born with:</b>  <div>                         harelip                          crossed or wall-eyes (squint)                          other deformities                     </div> <div>                         epilepsy (some kinds)                          mental slowness                          birthmarks                     </div>		<b>Problems that begin in the mind (mental illnesses):</b>  fear that something is harmful when it is not (paranoia) nervous worry (anxiety) belief in hexes (witchcraft) uncontrolled fear (hysteria)

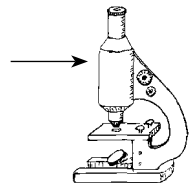
Infectious Diseases

Infectious diseases are caused by bacteria and other *organisms* (living things) that harm the body. They are spread in many ways. Here are some of the most important kinds of organisms that cause infections and examples of sicknesses they cause:

## EXAMPLES OF INFECTIOUS DISEASES

Organism that causes the sickness	Name of the sickness	How it is spread or enters the body	Principal medicine
bacteria (microbes or germs)	tuberculosis	through the air (coughing)	different antibiotics for different bacterial infections
	tetanus	dirty wounds	
	some diarrhea	dirty fingers, water, flies	
	pneumonia (some kinds)	through the air (coughing)	
	gonorrhea, chlamydia, and syphilis	sexual contact	
	earache	with a cold	
	infected wounds	contact with dirty things	
	sores with pus	direct contact (by touch)	
virus (germs smaller than bacteria)	colds, flu, measles, mumps, chickenpox, infantile paralysis, virus diarrhea	from someone who is sick, through the air, by coughing, flies, etc.	acetaminophen and other painkillers
	rabies	animal bites	Vaccinations prevent some virus infections.
	warts	touch	
	HIV	body fluids of someone infected get inside another person's body	Antiretroviral medicines fight HIV.
fungus	ringworm athlete's foot jock itch yeast infection	by touch or from clothing	nystatin, miconazole, gentian violet, ointments with undecylenic, benzoic, or salicylic acid
internal parasites (harmful animals living in the body)	In the gut: worms amebas (dysentery)	feces-to-mouth lack of cleanliness	different specific medicines
	In the blood: malaria	mosquito bite	a combination of malaria medicines
external parasites (harmful animals living on the body)	lice fleas bedbugs scabies	by contact with infected persons or their clothes	permethrin, keeping very clean

Bacteria, like many of the organisms that cause infections, are so small you cannot see them without a microscope—an instrument that makes tiny things look bigger. Viruses are even smaller than bacteria.



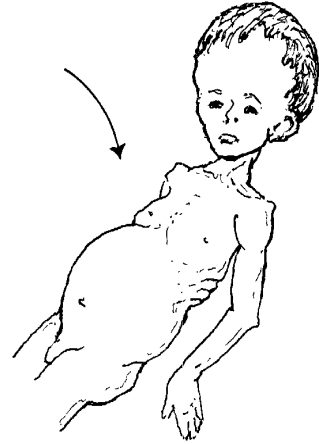
Antibiotics (penicillin, tetracycline, etc.) are medicines that help cure certain illnesses caused by bacteria. **Antibiotics have no effect on illnesses caused by viruses**, such as colds, flu, mumps, chickenpox, etc. **Do not treat virus infections with antibiotics.** They will not help and may be harmful (see **antibiotics**, p. 55).

## SICKNESSES THAT ARE HARD TO TELL APART

Sometimes diseases that have different causes and require different treatment result in problems that look very much alike. For example:

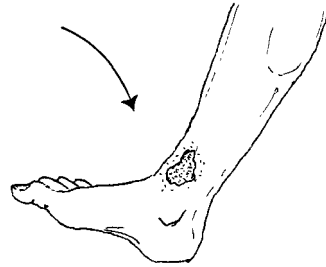
1. **A child who slowly becomes thin and wasted, while his belly gets more and more swollen, could have any (or several) of the following problems:**

- malnutrition (see p. 112)
- a lot of roundworms, p. 140, (usually together with malnutrition)
- advanced tuberculosis (p. 179)
- a long-term severe urinary infection (p. 234)
- any of several problems of the liver or spleen
- leukemia (cancer of the blood)
- HIV (p. 399)



2. **An older person with a big, open, slowly growing sore on the ankle could have:**

- bad circulation that results from varicose veins or other causes (p. 213)
- diabetes (p. 127)
- infection of the bone (osteomyelitis)
- leprosy (p. 191)
- tuberculosis of the skin (p. 212)
- advanced syphilis (p. 237)



The medical treatment for each of these diseases is different, so to treat them correctly it is important to tell them apart.

Many illnesses at first seem very similar. But if you ask the right questions and know what to look for, you can often learn information and see certain signs that will help tell you what illness a person has.

This book describes the typical history and signs for many illnesses. But be careful! Diseases do not always show the signs described for them—or the signs may be confusing. **For difficult cases, the help of a skilled health worker or doctor is often needed.** Sometimes special tests or analyses are necessary.

### **Work within your limits!**

**In using this book, remember it is easy to make mistakes.**

**Never pretend you know something you do not.**

**If you are not fairly sure what an illness is and how to treat it, or if the illness is very serious—get medical help.**

## SICKNESSES THAT ARE OFTEN CONFUSED OR GIVEN THE SAME NAME

Many of the common names people use for their sicknesses were first used long before anyone knew about germs or bacteria or the medicines that fight them. Different diseases that caused more or less similar problems—such as ‘high fever’ or ‘pain in the side’—were often given a single name. In many parts of the world, these common names are still used. City-trained doctors often neither know nor use these names. For this reason, people sometimes think they apply to ‘sicknesses doctors do not treat’. So they treat these **home sicknesses** with herbs or home remedies.

Actually, most of these home sicknesses or ‘folk diseases’ are the same ones known to medical science. Only the names are different.

**For many sicknesses, home remedies work well. But for some sicknesses, treatment with modern medicine works much better and may be life-saving.** This is especially true for dangerous infections like pneumonia, typhoid, tuberculosis, or infections after giving birth.

To know which sicknesses definitely require modern medicines and to decide what medicine to use, it is important that you try to **find out what the disease is in the terms used by trained health workers and in this book.**

**If you cannot find the sickness you are looking for in this book, look for it under a different name or in the chapter that covers the same sort of problem.**

**Use the list of CONTENTS and the INDEX.**

If you are unsure what the sickness is—especially if it seems serious—try to get medical help.

The rest of this chapter gives examples of common or *traditional* names people use for various sicknesses. Often a single name is given to diseases that are different according to medical science.

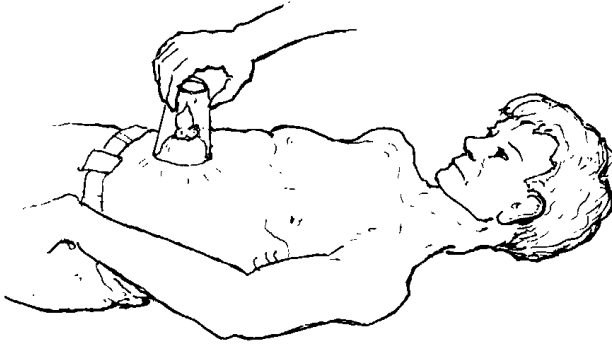
Examples cannot be given for each country or area where this book may be used. Therefore, I have kept those from the Spanish edition, with names used by villagers in western Mexico. They will not be the same names you use. However, people in many parts of the world see and speak of their illnesses in a similar way. So the examples may help you think about how people name diseases in your area.

Can you think of a name your people use for the following ‘folk diseases’? If you can, write it in after the Spanish name, where it says,

Name in Your Area: \_\_\_\_\_

## EXAMPLES OF LOCAL NAMES FOR SICKNESSES

Spanish Name: **EMPACHO (STOPPED-UP GUT)** Name in Your Area: \_\_\_\_\_



In medical terms *empacho* (impaction) means that the gut is stopped up or *obstructed* (see p. 94). But in Mexican villages any illness causing stomach-ache or diarrhea may be called *empacho*. It is said that a ball of hair or something else blocks a part of the gut. People put the blame on witches or evil spirits, and treat with magic cures and *cupping* (see

picture). Sometimes folk healers pretend to take a ball of hair and thorns out of the gut by sucking on the belly.

Different illnesses that cause stomach pain or discomfort and are sometimes called *empacho* are:

- diarrhea or dysentery with cramps (p. 153)
- worms (p. 140)
- swollen stomach due to malnutrition (p. 112)
- indigestion or stomach ulcer (p. 128)
- and rarely, true gut obstruction or appendicitis (p. 94)

Most of these problems are not helped much by magic cures or cupping. To treat *empacho*, try to identify and treat the sickness that causes it.

Spanish Name: **DOLOR DE IJAR (SIDE PAINS)** Name in Your Area: \_\_\_\_\_

This name is used for any pain women get in one side of their belly. Often the pain goes around to the mid or lower back. Possible causes of this kind of pain include:

- an infection of the urinary system (the kidneys, the bladder, or the tubes that join them, see p. 234)
- cramps or gas pains (see diarrhea, p. 153)
- menstrual pains (see p. 245)
- appendicitis (see p. 94)
- an infection, cyst, or tumor in the womb or ovaries (p. 243) or an ectopic pregnancy (see p. 280)



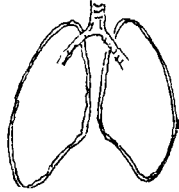
Spanish Name: **LA CONGESTIÓN (CONGESTION)** Name in Your Area: \_\_\_\_\_

Any sudden upset or illness that causes great distress is called *la congestión* by Mexican villagers. People speak of *congestión* of:

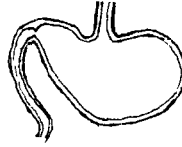
the head,



the chest,



the stomach,



or the whole body.



It is said that *la congestión* strikes persons who break 'the diet' (see p. 123), by eating foods that are forbidden or *taboo* after childbirth, while taking a medicine, or when they have a cold or cough. Although **these foods usually cause no harm** and are sometimes just what their bodies need, many people will not touch them because they are so afraid of getting *la congestión*.

Different illnesses that are sometimes called *la congestión* are:

- Food poisoning, from eating spoiled food: causes sudden vomiting followed by diarrhea, cramps, and weakness (see p. 135).
- A severe allergic reaction, in allergic persons after they eat certain foods (shellfish, chocolate, etc.), take certain medicines, or are injected with penicillin. May cause vomiting, diarrhea, cold sweat, breathing trouble, itchy rash, and severe distress (see p. 166).
- Any sudden upset of the stomach or gut: see diarrhea (p. 153), vomiting (p. 161), and acute abdomen (p. 93).
- Sudden or severe difficulty breathing: caused by asthma (p. 167), pneumonia (p. 171), or something stuck in the throat (p. 79).
- Illnesses that cause seizures (fits) or paralysis: see seizures (p. 178), tetanus (p. 182), meningitis (p. 185), polio (p. 314), and stroke (p. 327).
- Heart attacks: mostly in older persons (p. 325).

Spanish Name: **LATIDO (PULSING)** Name in Your Area: \_\_\_\_\_

*Latido* is a name used in Latin America for a pulsing or 'jumping' in the pit of the stomach. It is really the pulse **of the aorta** or big blood vessel coming from the heart. This pulse can be seen and felt on a person who is very thin and hungry. *Latido* is often a sign of malnutrition (p. 112)—or hunger! Eating enough good food is the only real treatment (see p. 110 and 111).

Spanish Name: **SUSTO (HYSTERIA, FRIGHT)** Name in Your Area: \_\_\_\_\_

According to Mexican villagers, **susto** is caused by a sudden fright a person has had, or by witchcraft, black magic, or evil spirits. A person with **susto** is very nervous and afraid. He may shake, behave strangely, not be able to sleep, lose weight, or even die.

**Possible medical explanations for *susto*:**

1. In many people, **susto** is a state of fear or **hysteria**, perhaps caused by the 'power of belief' (see p. 4). For example, a woman who is afraid someone will hex her becomes nervous and does not eat or sleep well. She begins to grow weak and lose weight. She takes this as a sign she has been hexed, so she becomes still more nervous and frightened. Her **susto** gets worse and worse.

2. In babies or small children, **susto** is usually very different. Bad dreams may cause a child to cry out in his sleep or wake up frightened. High fevers from any illness can cause very strange speech and behavior (**delirium**). A child that often looks and acts worried may be malnourished (p. 112). Sometimes early signs of tetanus (p. 182) or meningitis (p. 185) are also called **susto**.

**Treatment:**

When the **susto** is caused by a specific illness, treat the illness. Help the person understand its cause. Ask for medical advice, if needed.

When the **susto** is caused by fright, try to comfort the person and help him understand that his fear itself is the cause of his problem. Magic cures and home remedies sometimes help.

If the frightened person is breathing very hard and fast, his body may be getting too much air—which may be part of the problem:

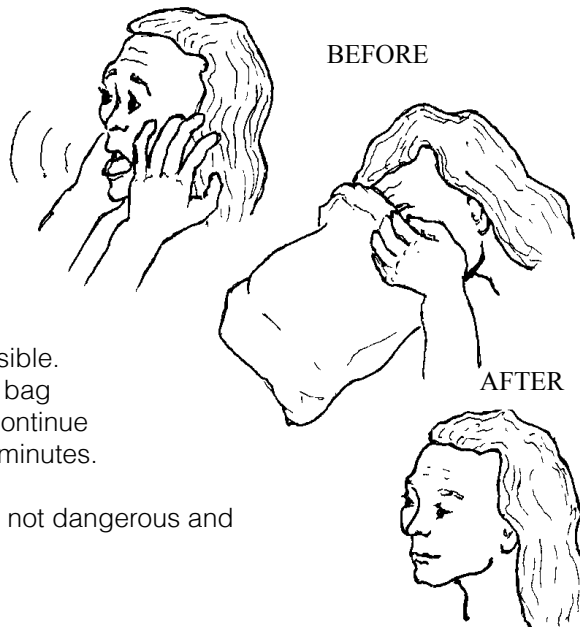
**EXTREME FRIGHT OR HYSTERIA WITH FAST HEAVY BREATHING (HYPERVENTILATION)**

**Signs:**

- person very frightened
- breathing fast and deep
- fast, pounding heartbeat
- numbness or tingling of face, hands, or feet
- muscle cramps

**Treatment:**

- ◆ Keep the person as quiet as possible.
- ◆ Have her put her face in a paper bag and breathe slowly. She should continue breathing the same air for 2 or 3 minutes. This will usually calm her down.
- ◆ Explain to her that the problem is not dangerous and she will soon be all right.





## MISUNDERSTANDINGS DUE TO CONFUSION OF NAMES

This page shows 2 examples of misunderstandings that can result when certain names like 'cancer' and 'leprosy' mean one thing to medical workers and something else to villagers. In talking with health workers—and in using this book:

**Avoid misunderstanding—go by the signs and history of a person's sickness, not the name people give it!**

Spanish Name: **CÁNCER (CANCER)** Name in Your Area: \_\_\_\_\_

Mexican villagers use the word *cáncer* for any severe infection of the skin, especially badly infected wounds (p. 88) or gangrene (p. 213).

In modern medical language, cancer is not an infection, but an abnormal growth or lump in any part of the body. Common types of cancer that you should watch out for are:

cancer of the skin  
(p. 211)



breast cancer  
(p. 279)



cancer of the womb or ovaries  
(p. 280)



Any hard, painless, slowly growing lump in any part of your body may be cancer. Cancer is often dangerous and may need surgery.

**At the first suspicion of cancer seek medical help.**

Spanish Name: **LEPRA (LEPROSY)** Name in Your Area: \_\_\_\_\_

Mexican villagers call any open spreading sore *lepra*. This leads to confusion, because medical workers use this term only for true leprosy (Hansen's disease, p. 191). Sores commonly called *lepra* are:

- impetigo and other skin infections (p. 202)
- sores that come from insect bites or scabies (p. 199)
- chronic sores or skin ulcers such as those caused by poor circulation (p. 213)
- skin cancer (p. 211)
- less commonly, leprosy (p. 191) or tuberculosis of the skin (p. 212)



This child has impetigo, not leprosy.

CONFUSION BETWEEN DIFFERENT ILLNESSES  
THAT CAUSE FEVER

Spanish Name: *LA FIEBRE* (THE FEVER) Name in Your Area: \_\_\_\_\_

Correctly speaking, a *fever* is a **body temperature higher than normal**. But in Latin America, a number of serious illnesses that cause high temperatures are all called *la fiebre*—or ‘the fever’.

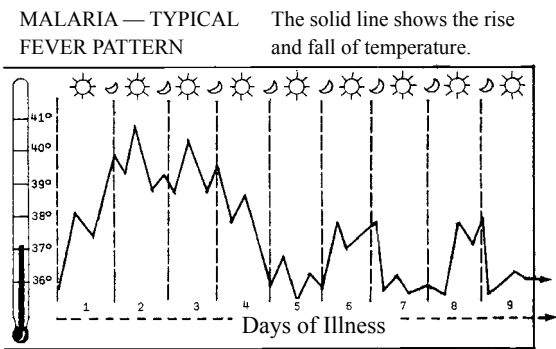
To prevent or treat these diseases successfully, it is important to know how to tell one from another.

Here are some of the important acute illnesses in which fever is an outstanding sign. The drawings show the **fever pattern** (rise and fall of temperature) that is typical for each disease.



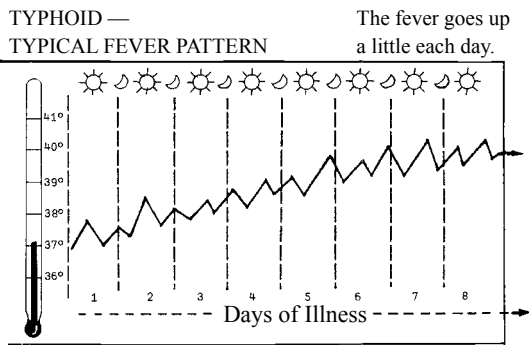
**Malaria: (see p. 186)**

Begins with weakness, chills and fever. Fever may come and go for a few days, with shivering (chills) as the temperature rises, and sweating as it falls. Then, fever may come for a few hours every second or third day. On other days, the person may feel more or less well.



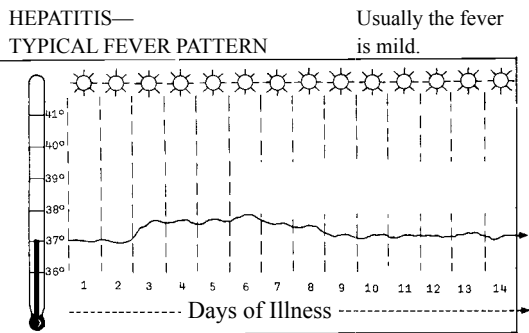
**Typhoid: (see p. 188)**

Begins like a cold. Temperature goes up a little more each day. Pulse relatively slow. Sometimes diarrhea and dehydration. Trembling or delirium (mind wanders). Person very ill.



**Typhus: (see p. 190)**

Similar to typhoid. Rash similar to that of measles, with tiny bruises.



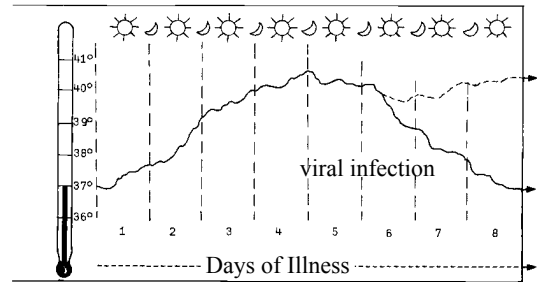
**Hepatitis: (see p. 172)**

Person loses appetite. Does not wish to eat or smoke. Wants to vomit (nausea). Eyes and skin turn yellow; urine orange or brown; stools whitish. Sometimes liver becomes large, tender. Mild fever. Person very weak.

**Pneumonia: (see p. 171)**

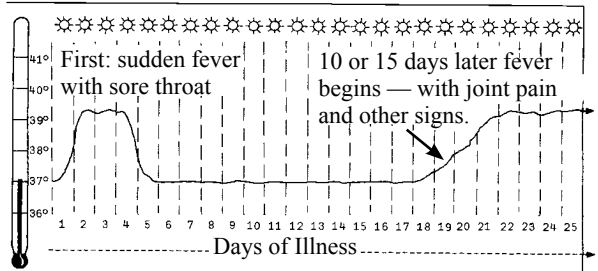
Fast, shallow breathing.  
Temperature rises quickly.  
Cough with green, yellow, or bloody mucus. May be pain in chest. Person very ill.

PNEUMONIA — TYPICAL FEVER PATTERN

**Rheumatic fever: (see p. 310)**

Most common in children and teenagers. Pain in joints. High fever. Often comes after a sore throat. May be pain in the chest with shortness of breath. Or uncontrolled movements of arms and legs.

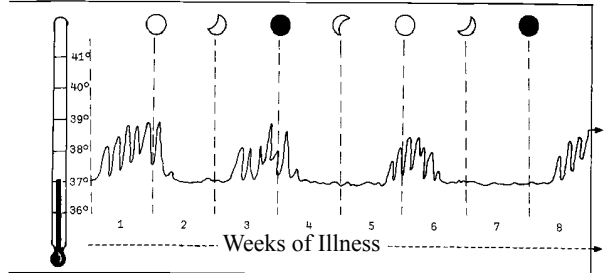
RHEUMATIC FEVER-TYPICAL FEVER PATTERN

**Brucellosis (undulant fever, Malta fever): (see p. 188)**

Begins slowly with tiredness, headache, and pains in the bones. Fever and sweating most common at night. Fever disappears for a few days only to come back again. This may go on for months or years.

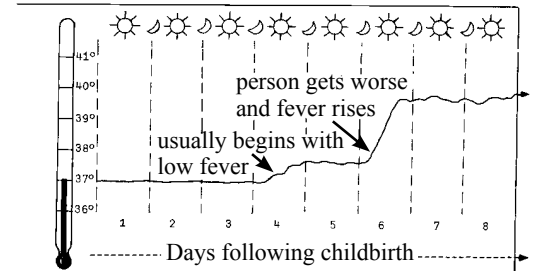
BRUCELLOSIS —  
TYPICAL FEVER PATTERN

Fever comes in waves. Rises in the afternoon and falls at night.

**Childbirth fever: (see p. 276)**

Begins a day or more after giving birth. Starts with a slight fever, which often rises later. Foul-smelling vaginal *discharge*. Pain and sometimes bleeding.

CHILDBIRTH FEVER — TYPICAL FEVER PATTERN



**All of these illnesses can be dangerous.** In addition to those shown here, there are many other diseases that may cause similar signs and fever. For example, fevers that last for more than 1 month, or night sweats, may be caused by HIV infection (see p. 399). When possible, seek medical help.

