

Altitude Sickness

The Symptoms

The lack of oxygen at higher elevations can cause many problems for those who don't take the time to acclimate themselves to the high altitude. Symptoms of high altitude sickness include shortness of breath, coughing, lack of appetite, nausea or vomiting, staggering gait, disturbed sleep, and severe headache. Symptoms usually start within the first 12 to 24 hours after arrival and begin to diminish after the third day.

Prevention is the key

The best prevention is slow ascent with gradual acclimatization to altitude. Gradual acclimatization should begin at an elevation of 9,000 feet. It's recommended that visitors should not ascend more than 1,000 feet per day.

If traveling from sea level, stay in Denver, or one of the other cities along the Front Range, for two days before gradually heading up to the high country over the next several days.

Another key to prevention is to drink a lot of water – at least 2 quarts a day! Alcohol and caffeinated drinks don't count and can compound problems associated with high altitude sickness.

Check with a Doctor before you go

As I said previously, prior medical conditions can compound the effects of high altitude. These conditions include, but are not limited to: chronic lung disease, pulmonary hypertension, previous stroke, pregnancy, heart failure, angina, anemia, and sickle cell disease.

Doctors at lower elevations may not be aware of the fact that certain medical problems can be compounded at higher elevations, so check for a Doctor that has knowledge of high altitude and your condition.

Be sure there will be no conflict with medications. Be sure that all medications are current (i.e. not expired) before you travel.

What to do if you Exhibit Symptoms

A person exhibiting symptoms of altitude sickness should breathe deeply, eat quick energy foods such as dried fruit, and keep exertion to a minimum. Sleep is not recommended because it lowers the respiration rate and can make symptoms worse. Aspirin can be taken for headaches, antacids may alleviate some of the other symptoms. Tobacco and smoking are definitely not recommended.

If symptoms persist, descend to a lower altitude and seek immediate medical attention! Continued exposure to high altitude can result in the victim becoming too weak to travel, and may lead to serious complications and even death.

Excerpt from 1998, The Colorado Guide