

Altitude Sickness Treatment Essentials

While skiing, mountain biking, and rock climbing are fabulous forms of active and healthy travel, altitude sickness could ruin your mile-high vacation. Altitude sickness is an uncomfortable and potentially serious condition that affects some people when they travel to high-altitude destinations, from the Colorado Rockies to the Annapurnas in Nepal.

But there are some steps you can take to help prevent altitude sickness while traveling and others to relieve symptoms of altitude sickness if you do develop it.



As you travel to high altitudes, the amount of oxygen in the air you are breathing declines. Once you reach altitudes of over 8,000 feet, the oxygen levels in the air are significantly lower. It can be difficult for your body to adjust to this decreased oxygen, along with the cool and dry air, and closer proximity to the sun, all of which come with spending time at high altitudes. Fortunately, there are steps to take for both altitude sickness prevention and altitude sickness treatment.

Types of Altitude Sickness

People who live at high altitudes adjust to the low oxygen levels, but for travelers first arriving at a high-altitude environment, altitude sickness can strike.

There are three types of altitude sickness to be aware of:

Acute mountain sickness (AMS):

AMS is the mildest and most common type of altitude sickness. It affects an estimated 25 percent of people who travel to and sleep in locations above 8,000 feet. Symptoms of AMS may include headache, fatigue, appetite loss, nausea, and vomiting. AMS usually occurs within 2 to 12 hours of arriving at a high-altitude location and goes away within one to three days of being there.

High-altitude cerebral edema (HACE):

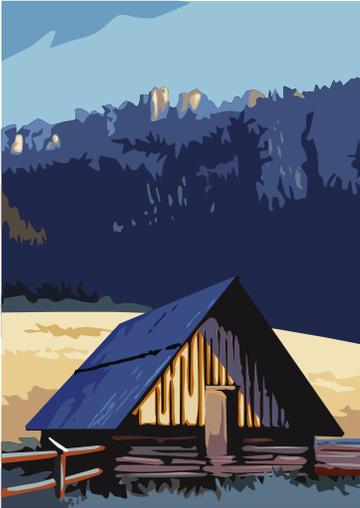
On rare occasions, people who have AMS develop HACE. HACE can result in extreme fatigue, drowsiness, confusion, lack of coordination, and pulmonary embolism or PE, a condition in which a blood clot travels to the lungs. HACE is severely life-threatening, so anyone who experiences these symptoms should immediately go to a lower altitude and seek medical attention.

High-altitude pulmonary edema (HAPE):

HAPE is especially common in mountain climbers who reach altitudes of over 14,000 feet. Symptoms of HAPE include shortness of breath, weakness, and cough. Since HAPE is even more deadly than HACE, anyone with symptoms of HAPE should immediately receive oxygen therapy or move to lower ground.

Altitude Sickness Prevention & Treatment on page 2.

Altitude Sickness Prevention



The best way to prevent altitude sickness is to allow your body to adjust to the decreased levels of oxygen in high-altitude locations:

Ascend slowly. Because it can take several days for your body to adjust to decreased oxygen, if you are traveling from sea level to a destination above 8,000 feet, try to plan your trip so that you gradually reach higher altitudes over the course of a few days. A good rule of thumb is to avoid ascending more than 1,000 feet a day. If you are traveling to very high altitudes, stop at 8,000 to 9,000 feet for a few days before moving on to allow your body to adjust.

Sleep low. Your blood levels of oxygen are the lowest when you are sleeping at a high altitude. If possible, plan your vacation so that you visit high altitudes during the day and return to lower altitudes for sleeping. For instance, book your hotel a couple of thousand feet lower than the mountain you will be skiing, biking, or climbing on during the day.

Take medications. If your doctor recommends it, consider taking acetazolamide (Diamox) to help your body adjust to rapidly increasing altitudes.

Avoid alcohol. You should not consume alcoholic beverages for at least the first two days you are at a high altitude.

Delay exercise. Also plan to relax for the first couple of days before engaging in anything more than mild exercise.

Altitude Sickness Treatment

If you do develop altitude sickness, the following treatment options may help:

Over-the-counter pain relievers. These can help ease altitude sickness-related headaches.

Move to lower ground. For any type of altitude sickness, the best treatment is to immediately move to a lower altitude. Go down 1,500 to 2,000 feet at a time, until your symptoms disappear.

Wait it out. If your symptoms are mild, taking it easy as your body adjusts to the higher altitude for a few days may help.

Call your doctor. Certain prescription medications, including acetazolamide, dexamethasone, and nifedipine, can help relieve altitude sickness symptoms.

It is important to listen to your body when traveling to high-altitude locations, since altitude sickness can be serious. If you suspect that you are experiencing altitude sickness, don't go any higher until your symptoms improve and move to lower ground if your symptoms get worse.

*Source: <http://www.everydayhealth.com/healthy-travel/altitude-sickness-treatment-essentials.aspx>