Spanish
Español

Information From Your Health Care Provider

ALTITUDE ILLNESS

(Mountain Sickness)

BASIC INFORMATION

DESCRIPTION

Altitude illness results from travel to higher-than-normal altitudes. It can affect anyone, no matter what his or her age or how healthy they are. Types of altitude illness include:

- Acute mountain sickness (AMS); the most common.
- High-altitude pulmonary edema (HAPE) and high-altitude cerebral edema (HACE). These are less common.

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Mild symptoms may begin when you climb or travel to around 7000 to 8000 feet.

Headache, feeling lightheaded and weak.

Nausea or vomiting.

Sleeping problems.

- As you go higher, more severe symptoms may occur.

Cough and trouble with breathing.

Unsteady walk.

Confusion; hallucination (seeing things that aren't there).

Coma or unconsciousness.

CAUSES

There is less oxygen in the air at higher altitudes. Symptoms start to develop when the body tries to adjust to having less oxygen than it normally has. People who live at high altitudes have adapted to these lower oxygen levels and do not get sick.

RISK INCREASES WITH

- Some people are more susceptible. It is unclear why certain people get sick while others do not.

At 14,000 feet, most people will have at least mild symptoms.
- People with severe heart or lung disease, or people with sickle cell anemia.
- Going too high too quickly.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- Educate yourself before your trip. Find out how high the altitude will be. Know the symptoms of altitude illness. Find out if medical help will be handy.
- Ask your health care provider for advice about high-altitude travel for children, for pregnant women, and for people with chronic health problems. The travel may be considered safe, but find out for sure.
- While on the trip, slowly adjust to changes in altitude. Rest for a day or two at each 1000 to 2000 feet. Take it easy, don't overdo it; drink fluids, but not alcohol.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Most cases are mild and do not need medical treatment. Recovery takes only one to a few days.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

Serious outcomes, including death, are very rare. They are only likely to occur if the person is unable to go down to a lower level, or is not able to get medical help.

DIAGNOSIS & TREATMENT

GENERAL MEASURES

- If mild symptoms occur, rest for a day or two at that altitude. You may want to go back down (to descend) to a lower altitude. Do not travel higher (to ascend) until the symptoms resolve or get much better.
- If symptoms do not improve or they get worse, seek medical help. Your health care provider will ask about your symptoms, may do a physical exam, and have medical tests performed to check on your heart, lungs, and other body systems.
- Treatment steps will depend on your symptoms. You may be advised to go to a lower altitude. This is the most important and only sure treatment step.
- Symptoms should improve in a few days if you rest, drink plenty of fluids, don't drink alcohol, and avoid heavy exercise.
- For more severe symptoms, you will need to go to a lower altitude immediately. You may need pure oxygen, breathed in through a mask, for a period. A hospital stay may be necessary until you recover.

MEDICATIONS

- Ask your health care provider's advice before you travel about drugs that can help prevent or treat symptoms. They do have side effects, so be cautious.
- For mild symptoms, such as headache, you may use pain relievers, such as ibuprofen or naproxen.
- In severe cases, drugs will be given to treat complications and help speed recovery.

ACTIVITY

Resume daily activities gradually upon returning to your normal altitude.

DIET

If you become ill, increase fluid intake, avoid alcohol, and eat small meals.

NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF

You or a family member has altitude illness symptoms, or wants to discuss symptoms that occurred on a trip.