

AIR FORCE



OUTDOOR RECREATION

HIGH ALTITUDE ILLNESS



United States Air Force Academy
Outdoor Recreation Center | Bldg 5136

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HIGH-ALTITUDE ILLNESS

Every year, millions of people go to the mountains for backpacking, skiing, mountain climbing and other activities. If you're planning a trip to altitudes over 8,000 feet, talk with your doctor about high-altitude illness (also called mountain sickness).

WHAT CAUSES HIGH-ALTITUDE ILLNESS?

The higher you climb above sea level, the less oxygen there is in the air. The oxygen level becomes very low at altitudes above 8,000 feet. People who normally live at lower altitudes have problems at high altitudes because their bodies aren't used to working on so little oxygen. If you stay at high altitude for a long time, your body can acclimate to the low oxygen level and you don't get sick from it. There are three main types of high-altitude illness:

1. Acute mountain sickness (AMS) - Common at altitudes of 7,000ft – 15,000ft.
2. High-altitude pulmonary edema (HAPE) which affects the lungs. This type is rare below 17,000ft.
3. High-altitude cerebral edema (HACE) which affects the brain. This type is rare below 17,000ft.

These illnesses can be serious, but they can also be prevented.

PREVENTION OF HIGH-ALTITUDE ILLNESS

You can do two important things to prevent high-altitude illness:

1. Take your time traveling to higher altitudes. When you travel to a high altitude, your body will begin adjusting right away to the lower amount of oxygen in the air, but it takes several days for your body to adjust completely. If you're healthy, you can probably safely go from sea level to 8,000 feet in a few days. When you reach an altitude above 8,000 feet, don't go up faster than 1,000 feet per day. The closer you live to sea level, the more time your body will need to get used to a high altitude. Plan your trip so your body has time to acclimate to the high altitude before starting any physical activity.
2. Sleep at an altitude that is lower than the altitude you were at during the day. For example, if you ski at an elevation of 10,000 feet during the day, sleep the night before and the night after at 8,500 feet.



HOW DO I KNOW IF I AM GETTING HIGH-ALTITUDE ILLNESS?

Some of the first signs of high-altitude illness are headache, lightheadedness, fatigue, trouble sleeping, loss of appetite and nausea. If you have these symptoms, stop going up to higher altitude or go back down to lower altitude until your symptoms go away. More severe symptoms include difficulty breathing, even while resting, coughing, confusion and the inability to walk a straight line. If you get these symptoms, seek medical advice.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I GET HIGH-ALTITUDE ILLNESS?

The best treatment for any of the three high-altitude illnesses is to go back down to lower altitude right away. If you only have mild symptoms, you may be able to stay at that altitude and let your body adjust. If you do this, don't exercise at all just keep resting until feeling better. Keep going down until your symptoms go completely away. Don't ignore signs of high-altitude illness. People can die of high-altitude illnesses if they don't realize the signs or if they don't believe their illness is caused by the high altitude. When you have signs of high-altitude illnesses, don't go to a higher altitude until you feel better and your symptoms have gone away completely.

LINKS TO HIGH-ALTITUDE ILLNESS INFORMATION

www.cdc.gov

www.ncbi.nih.gov

IS IT SAFE TO GO TO A HIGH ALTITUDE IF I HAVE CHRONIC ILLNESS LIKE HEART DISEASE OR LUNG DISEASE?

It might be safe. The answer depends on the the type of chronic illness you have and how severe it is. Most people with chronic illnesses, such as heart or lung disease can safely spend time at high altitudes if the disease is under good control. People with coronary artery disease, mild emphysema or high blood pressure aren't at greater risk of high-altitude illness than people without these diseases. They also don't risk making their disease worse by traveling to a high altitude. Being overweight does not increase the risk of high-altitude illness. Some diseases make going to a high altitude very dangerous. People with sickle cell anemia shouldn't go to high altitudes. High altitude is also dangerous for people with severe lung disease (COPD) or severe emphysema and for people with severe heart disease. If you have a chronic disease, ask you doctor if it is safe for you to travel to a high altitude.

IS GOING TO A HIGH ALTITUDE DANGEROUS DURING PREGNANCY?

There isn't much information about the risk of high-altitude illness during pregnancy, so it's hard to say if going to a high altitude is safe for pregnant women. Some experts recommend that pregnant women not travel to an altitude above 8,000 feet. If you're pregnant, ask your doctor for advice before you travel to a high altitude.

WHAT ABOUT CHILDREN AND HIGH ALTITUDE?

It's usually safe for children to go to high altitudes, but they are more likely to get high-altitude illness because their bodies have a hard time adjusting to the low oxygen level. A child may not be able to recognize the symptoms of high-altitude illness, so parents and other adults must carefully watch for any signs of high-altitude illness in children.

EMERGENCY PHONE NUMBERS

911

719-333-2002 Security Forces USAFA (non-emergency)