

High Altitude Tips

Introduction

While most of Estes Park's visitors from lower altitudes have no medical difficulty here, there are some high altitude health effects of which you may wish to be aware. This page lists these and suggests hints that may help you better enjoy your vacation.

For medical care please call Timberline Urgent Care at 586-2343 or Estes Park Medical Center at 586-2317. If at any time you have a medical emergency, dial 222 from any phone on grounds or 911 and the appropriate personnel will be dispatched.

Acute Mountain Sickness

This is the most common high altitude illness. Occurring usually above 8,000 feet, some will experience it at lower altitudes. Symptoms often begin on arrival, but the onset may be delayed. The most common manifestations are headache, nausea, loss of appetite, insomnia with wakeful sleep and strange dreams, lethargy and sometimes a warm or flushed feeling in the face. Children may experience these symptoms, plus vomiting. The illness is usually self-limited, lasting only one or two days. Resting, especially during the first few days, hiking at lower altitudes on the first day, eating a light diet, drinking more liquids and decreasing smoking will help significantly. Mild medications such as aspirin or sleeping medications may help, but barbiturates (Seconal and Nembutal) should be avoided as these can aggravate the illness.

The best treatment is prevention on your next trip. This is done by taking several days to arrive at altitude; and by taking Diamox, which can be prescribed by your doctor, 250 mg. twice daily for two days before arrival and the first two days here. Rarely, Acute Mountain Sickness progresses to a more serious illness called High Altitude Pulmonary Edema. If you experience increased breathing difficulties, coughing, continued headache with mental disturbance, or a staggering gait, you should see a physician immediately.

Altitude Effects on Medical Problems

People with chronic lung or heart disease may be adversely affected by Estes Park's elevation. Less oxygen changes body functions, making it harder to breathe and forcing the heart to work more. Whatever recreational activities you undertake, your pulse will be faster at a higher altitude than it would be at a lower elevation. Therefore, you must adjust your customary pace to avoid overexertion. In fact, it is best if you have any of these conditions to spend the first few days at altitude at a much reduced activity level. And it's always advisable, before coming, to discuss the trip with your personal doctor who knows your situation best. If you find yourself having continued problems because of a worsening condition, you should seek medical advice immediately.

Swelling

Otherwise symptomless swelling of face, hands and feet, with a weight gain of 4 to 12 pounds sometimes occurs at altitude, most often in women. The swelling may persist for several days after returning to lower altitude before it resolves spontaneously. The cause is unknown but the condition will respond to a low salt diet and diuretics.

Dehydration

Much more common than swelling is dehydration due to the marked dryness of the high mountain air, combined with the increased breathing rate from less oxygen. This results in increased body losses of moisture, which can be made greater by alcohol consumption. A healthy adult should drink at least 6 to 8 glasses of water daily.

Nose Bleeds

Nose bleeds occur more frequently here because of the dry air, which dries the membranes of the nose making them brittle. Colds and dehydration may contribute as well. To avoid them use humidifiers, avoid colds (good luck), and stay hydrated. The most effective way to stop a nose bleed is to gently pinch the nose shut for 5 minutes.

Altitude Effects on Medications

Barbiturates, often prescribed as sleeping medications under such names as Nembutal and Seconal, may have a greater effect at altitude and should be used with caution. The same is true of alcohol. Oral anticoagulants (the "blood thinners" Coumadin and Warfarin) may be more active at high altitudes. Anyone taking these should have their prothrombin times checked frequently. Strong diuretics, such as Lasix, may cause significant falls of blood pressure when upright, resulting in light-headedness or fainting.

Sunburn

Because less atmosphere is above us here to filter out the burning ultraviolet rays of the sun, sunburn occurs much more readily. Don't underestimate the potential for a serious vacation-ruining sunburn. Use appropriate sun block.

Giardia

High country hikers and campers tempted to drink from the crystal clear lakes and streams should be aware that these often harbor an intestinal parasite called Giardia Lamblia. This nasty little bug may not cause symptoms until you return home and then be difficult to diagnose by those not familiar with it. The illness is manifested by marked diarrhea, foul smelling belching, and variable degrees of nausea, cramping, fever, chills and weight loss. The preferred treatment is prevention by not drinking the crystal clear water without first boiling it for 10 minutes.