

TAMPA BAY SKI CLUB

HEALTH EFFECTS OF HIGH ALTITUDE

At high elevations everyone is affected by altitude to some degree. At elevations of 8,000 plus ft, your body responds by breathing faster and more deeply, resulting in shortness of breath, especially on exertion. Some people develop mild symptoms of headache, nausea, sleep disruption, and unusual tiredness. Doctors call the symptoms “Acute Mountain Sickness” or AMS. These symptoms usually go away in a day or two. If symptoms are severe, persist, or worsen, you should consult a doctor. A short visit to a physician may save the rest of your vacation. Medications and oxygen can help you feel much better very quickly.

If you are concerned, or have ever had any indication of AMS, you can prevent it by taking a mild prescription drug, DIAMOX, before you go on your trip. Most family physicians will prescribe this medication via telephone if you tell them you are traveling to a high altitude destination. This is an inexpensive way to insure a comfortable and safe mountain vacation!

The effects of high altitude can be decreased by following these recommendations:

- * Increase Fluid Intake – drink two or three times more fluid than usual, water and juices are best: Adequate hydration is the key to preventing altitude illness.
- * Avoid Alcohol and minimize caffeine on your day of arrival and one to two days thereafter; be very careful if consuming alcohol, and remember, at this altitude, you may be much more sensitive to the effects of alcohol and sedatives.
- * Decrease salt intake – salt increases the severity of altitude illness.
- * Eat frequent small meals high in carbohydrates, low in fat, and low in protein.
- * Moderate physical activity and get plenty of rest.

A more serious condition is called HAPE or high altitude pulmonary edema. HAPE is recognized by a wet cough, increasing shortness of breath, and the feeling of fluid building up in your lungs. If you feel any of these symptoms developing, you need to seek medical attention immediately. HAPE is easy to treat, but can be life threatening if left unattended.

FROSTBITE AND HYPOTHERMIA

Frostbite results from cooling of body tissues and subsequent destruction of these tissues. Fingers, ears, and noses are especially susceptible. Keep the skin covered and warm up frequently. If blisters occur or if fingers or toes are involved, seek medical attention immediately. Dress in layers so that you can easily adjust to changing temperatures and weather conditions. Hats are extremely important since you can lose 80% of your body heat through your head.

DEHYDRATION

You will probably notice the dryness of the high mountain air, especially when coming from our climate. The decreased amount of oxygen will cause you to breathe more rapidly and lose further body water. Further, you may be more physically active on your ski vacation. All of the above will cause you to become dehydrated. An adult should strive to drink at least eight glasses of water per day. You may notice extra skin dryness and slight nosebleeds. Hydration is paramount but extra moisturizer and putting a little Vaseline in your nose may help with these symptoms. A humidifier may also help you feel more comfortable. If you don't have one in your room, you may request one from the front desk of your hotel.

HAVE FUN AND ENJOY YOUR MOUNTAIN VACATION!