

MEDfacts

An Educational Health Series From National Jewish Health®



Altitude Sickness

Since National Jewish Health is the “mile high city” of Denver, it’s elevation can cause some patients, who come from out of state, to experience altitude sickness.

What is altitude sickness?

Altitude sickness occurs when the body reacts poorly to sudden travel to high altitudes, where the air is “thinner” and the body gets less oxygen in each breath. About one in five people traveling to the mountains of Colorado suffer altitude sickness.

What are the symptoms of altitude sickness?

The most common symptom is a headache. Difficulty sleeping, shortness of breath, loss of appetite and, vomiting are other common symptoms. Symptoms usually develop in the first 12 hours after reaching altitude and subside in one to three days.

Who gets altitude sickness?

It is difficult to predict who will get altitude sickness. Even aerobically fit people can suffer. It is more likely to occur in people who come from sea level and among young people, especially children.

Is altitude sickness dangerous?

It is not dangerous in the vast majority of cases among people traveling to Colorado mountains. People with underlying respiratory or cardiovascular diseases should consult a doctor before coming to high altitudes as these conditions can make it difficult to adjust to altitude.

In extremely rare occasions people can develop more severe symptoms, called high-altitude pulmonary edema (HAPE) or high-altitude cerebral edema (HACE). They are characterized by extreme fatigue, weakness, and severe cough or confusion, drowsiness, and difficulty walking. People suffering such symptoms should consult a doctor.

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How do I avoid altitude sickness?

- The most reliable way to avoid altitude sickness is to ascend to altitude slowly, say spending a night in Denver before traveling to the mountains.
- Do not overexert yourself.
- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Minimize alcohol consumption because that can lead to dehydration, which can occur easily in the dry environment in the mountains.
- Eat lighter meals, high in carbohydrates.

How do I treat altitude sickness?

Rest, drink plenty of fluids, take a mild pain killer, such as aspirin, acetaminophen, or ibuprofen. If symptoms continue, contact your doctor.

National Jewish Health. It is not meant to be a substitute for consulting with your own physician.

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