Altitude sickness

Alice,

We are about to go to Vail, Colorado skiing. Is there anything that we can take to lessen the chance of the BAD altitude sickness headaches?

? Ready to enjoy

Answer

Dear Ready to Enjoy,

It's a great idea to plan ahead so you can make the most of your ski trip. Altitude sickness (sometimes called mountain sickness) is caused by the lack of oxygen and decreased air pressure at high altitudes. The condition is relatively common for people visiting altitudes above 8,000 feet (including Vail, Colorado) and the quicker you climb to high altitudes, the more likely you are to experience altitude sickness. Symptoms can range from mild (such as headaches, nausea, vomiting, shortness of breath, and trouble sleeping) to rather severe (including confusion, coughing up blood, tight chest, and a gray or pale complexion). So, what can you do to avoid these symptoms and enjoy your downhill runs? Read on for more info!

Altitude sickness can impact anyone regardless of age, sex at birth, or physical condition. However, those who live at sea level and those who have experienced it before are more likely to be effected by altitude sickness. But don't let that spark a fear of elevation! The following steps may help you avoid altitude sickness as you climb to higher heights:

- Give your body time to acclimate by increasing altitude slowly over time.
- Choose a place to stay at night that is at a lower altitude.
- Avoid alcohol, sleeping pills, or narcotics, as they slow breathing (so the body doesn’t get as much oxygen).
- Drink plenty of water.
- Eat regular meals that are high in carbohydrates (e.g. rice, pasta, cereal).
- Don't over-exert yourself, especially during your first few days.

List adapted from Medline Plus [2].

Another option that might help is to chat with your health care provider before your trip about taking medication [3] for the prevention and treatment of altitude sickness. Acetazolamide, dexamethasone, and nifedipine are just some of the types of medications used. Some of
these medicines can be taken before ascension or after symptoms develop. In addition to these medications, pain relievers, such as ibuprofen, can be used to relieve headaches caused by altitude sickness.

If you experience symptoms, it's recommended you head for lower ground as soon as possible. It's likely that the lower altitude will help to alleviate the symptoms. Most people with mild altitude sickness will get better on their own in a few days with no treatment at all. Even with that being the case though, it's still wise to check in with a medical professional to be sure you're not experiencing any complications from severe altitude sickness, including fluid in your lungs or swelling of the brain.

Lastly, sometimes the effects of altitude can be subtle and people don't notice their own symptoms. If you're hitting the slopes with friends, adopt the buddy system and make an agreement to keep an eye out for anyone that might be exhibiting tell-tale signs.

Enjoy your trip!

Alice!

Category:
General Health [4]
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Related questions

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Resources

Medical Services (Morningside) [11]
Medical Services (CUMC) [12]
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Feb 16, 1995
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Jun 17, 2016
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Source URL: https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/altitude-sickness-0

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