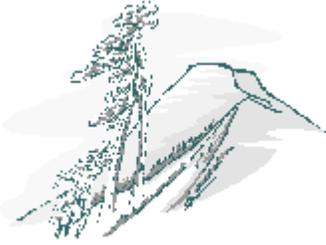


# Public Health

## International Travel: Altitude Sickness



Travelers heading to destinations greater than 7,000 feet may be at risk for altitude sickness. High altitudes may be classified as:

- High - 8,000 - 12,000 feet
- Very high - 12,000 - 18,000 feet
- Extremely high - over 18,000 feet

The risk of developing altitude sickness will depend upon factors such as the altitude reached; the time taken to reach the altitude and acclimatize before ascending further; the rate of ascent; the duration of time spent at high altitude; individual susceptibility and common sense.

### Forms of Altitude Sickness

There are different forms of altitude sickness. The mildest and most common form is called Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS). Symptoms such as headache, nausea, vomiting, fatigue, dizziness, and insomnia may occur. Some travelers compare it to resembling a hangover. DO NOT ascend any further if the symptoms occur as AMS may progress to a more serious form of altitude sickness called High Altitude Cerebral Edema (HACE). The symptoms already described along, with irrational behavior and unsteadiness may occur. If not recognized and treated early, HACE will proceed to coma and death.

High Altitude Pulmonary Edema (HAPE) may co-exist with AME and HACE, along with symptoms such as a dry cough, shortness of breath and decreased exercise performance. Again, if these symptoms go unrecognized, coma and death may be the end result.

### Prevention Measures

The following prevention measures, along with a proper attitude and common sense, may reduce the risk of altitude sickness.

- Avoid rapid ascent if possible. If not, take 1-2 days to acclimatize at the higher level
- Climb slowly avoiding overexertion
- Climb high, sleep low. The sleeping altitude should not increase by more than 1,000 feet per day. Every three days, rest for a day
- Avoid alcohol and sedatives
- Dress warmly. Hypothermia will worsen the symptoms of altitude sickness
- Drink lots of water to keep urine clear
- Eat foods high in carbohydrates and low in salt
- Consult a family physician regarding the use of Diamox (acetazolamide) to prevent altitude sickness if rapid ascent is necessary or if altitude sickness occurred in the past

Reference: Malaria, Montezuma and Me Public Health Services, Capital Health  
Mark Wise, M.D. (2000) February 2002.