

ALTITUDE ILLNESS

FACT SHEET



KEY FACTS

- High altitudes have less oxygen due to low air pressure and our bodies take time to adjust to this
- Climbing or traveling to places that are 2500 meters (8000 feet) or more above sea level may put you at risk for altitude illness
- The faster you ascend and the higher you climb, the greater the risk altitude illness
- Being physically fit does not reduce your risk of getting altitude illness

SYMPTOMS

- There are three types of altitude illness:
 - **Acute mountain sickness (AMS)** can show up within a few hours of reaching high places. Symptoms include headaches, tiredness, dizziness, loss of appetite, nausea and vomiting
 - **High altitude cerebral edema (HACE)** is due to brain swelling and usually happens after AMS. Symptoms include a severe headache, vomiting, feeling sleepy, unsteady and confused
 - **High altitude pulmonary edema (HAPE)** is due to fluid in the lungs. Symptoms include cough, shortness of breath, weakness and blue-tinged skin and nails (cyanosis)
- Severe AMS, HACE and HAPE are life-threatening and need urgent medical care

PREVENTION

- **Ascend gradually.** Avoid going straight from a low altitude to a place above 2500m (8000ft). Increase your sleeping altitude slowly and build in rest days
- **See your health care provider** before your trip. They may recommend medicines like acetazolamide (Diamox) to reduce symptoms
- Drink plenty of water, avoid alcohol and avoid strenuous activities in the first 48 hours at altitude
- Check that your insurance covers emergency evacuation and only climb with experienced guides

TREATMENT

- Be aware of the symptoms and tell others travelling with you if you are unwell
- If you have symptoms, don't go any higher until you feel better
- Rest and pain relief can help with mild symptoms
- If you have serious symptoms, like those of HAPE or HACE, **descend to a lower altitude right away**

MORE INFORMATION

Travellers are advised to check official health information from their own country, such as:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, United States: <https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/page/travel-to-high-altitudes>
- Travel Health Pro, United Kingdom: <https://travelhealthpro.org.uk/disease/12/altitude-illness>
- Medical Expeditions Travel at High Altitude Booklet, available in multiple languages: <https://www.medex.org.uk/the-medex-book/>

References

1. Hackett P, Schlim D. High Elevation Travel & Altitude Illness. CDC Yellow Book 2024. <https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/yellowbook/2024/environmental-hazards-risks/high-elevation-travel-and-altitude-illness>
2. Luks AM, Auerbach PS, Freer L, et al. Wilderness Medical Society Clinical Practice Guidelines for the Prevention and Treatment of Acute Altitude Illness: 2019 Update. Wilderness Environ Med. 2019;30(4S):S3-S18. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wem.2019.04.006>

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