

# High Altitude Health Hints

## Common health problems that affect visitors

Most visitors to this area will not be affected by illness. However, altitude, water, sun and temperature changes may cause some discomfort.

Here are some tips to help you prepare and stay healthy in the mountains:

### Preparation for Coming to High Altitude

If you can come rested, that seems to help. For sure, stay well-hydrated during your travel to altitude, and for the first few days at altitude. Also, do not exert yourself strenuously for the first 24-48 hours. So, don't plan to go running or exercising when you first get there.

For those of you who have a prior history of problems with altitude sickness, you may want to check with your doctor beforehand. There is a prescription medication available (called Diamox, or acetazolamide) that can help some people, but it must be taken 1-2 days before you travel in order to help.

### High Altitude Sickness

Elevations in the Upper Arkansas Valley vary from 7,000 feet in Salida and Buena Vista to over 14,000 feet at many of the area's mountain peaks. The elevation in the Winter Park area varies between 9,000 and 12,000 feet. The higher the altitude, the less oxygen there is in the air. Some people have a negative reaction to the decrease in oxygen. Symptoms for high altitude sickness usually last one to two days and may include nausea, headache, loss of appetite, insomnia, or lethargy. Severe cases may include vomiting, coughing, and dizziness.

Treatment includes frequent resting, doing recreational activities at a lower altitude the first day of your stay, eating lightly, drinking more water and electrolyte replacement drinks such as gatorade and decreasing smoking. Aspirin or Acetaminophen may help symptoms. Alcohol should be avoided, as it may intensify symptoms. Contact a physician if breathing becomes difficult, headache continues and is accompanied by mental disturbances, coughing begins, or walking becomes staggered.

### Altitude Effects on Medical Conditions

Individuals with chronic lung or heart disease may be affected adversely by the altitude. The decrease in oxygen that occurs at higher altitude alters body functions, making it difficult to breathe and forcing the heart to work harder. Individuals should avoid overexertion by moving at a slower pace. You may want to consult your physician before traveling to higher altitude.

### Altitude Effects on Alcohol and Medication

Alcohol and barbiturates should be used with caution, as their effect is increased at a higher altitude. Individuals taking anticoagulants (blood thinners) also may have increased effect and may require prothrombin times/bleeding times to be checked. Strong diuretics may cause blood pressure to fall, resulting in fainting or dizziness.

### Swelling

The cause of swelling is unknown, but typically goes away on its own several days after returning to a lower altitude. Diuretics and a low-salt diet also reduce swelling.

## **Dehydration**

The combination of dry mountain air and increased respiratory rate, due to the lower oxygen level at this altitude, may lead to a greater loss of body moisture. Drink at least six to eight glasses of water each day. Be aware that alcohol consumption can increase the chance of dehydration.

Dehydration and low humidity may dry the membranes of the nose and cause nosebleeds. If you get a nosebleed, pinch the nose together for at least five minutes.

## **Sunburns**

At this altitude there is less atmosphere to block the sun's rays, so sunburns occur more often. Snow and water reflect the sun and intensify the effect. Apply sunblock every two hours.

## **Giardia**

You may be tempted to drink water from the crystal clear lakes and creeks in the mountains, but don't do it. Be aware that these bodies of water contain an intestinal parasite called *Giardia lamblia*. This parasite causes diarrhea, nausea, cramping, fever, and chills. Symptoms may not appear until you return home. *Giardia* requires medical treatment.

## **Hypothermia**

Hypothermia may result from being in cold water or in a cold environment for an extended time. Our rivers and creeks include snow run-off which is very cold. Cold water cools the body temperature 32 times faster than the air. Summer weather can change quickly from warm to cold conditions. Be sure to take warm clothes and dress in layers. Risk of hypothermia increases with injury, alcohol/drug consumption, and for all children and seniors.

Victims of hypothermia may be confused; attempt to reorient the person. Rewarm the victim by removing wet garments and replacing with dry garments. Cover the victim with blankets. A rescuer may lie alongside the victim underneath the covers to assist in rewarming. The victim should be moved gently. If the victim is non-responsive, immediately transport to the nearest hospital. If breathing stops, perform CPR.

## **Drowning/Near Drowning**

The Arkansas River may be more treacherous than it appears. A drowning or near drowning victim needs to be reached and removed from the water as soon as possible. It is important for the rescuer to use caution to ensure his/her own safety, call for rescue help if you cannot rescue the person safely. Resuscitation should be started immediately, if needed.