

HEALTH TIP: HYDRATE, HYDRATE, HYDRATE

By Dr. Dennis Lipton

Feeling light-headed? Chapped lips? Everyone who lives in Vail will tell you, “Drink water!” Hydration is something most people don’t think much about, but when coming to altitude, it’s requires careful attention for several reasons.

1. The thin, arid air dries out your skin and airways. Sweat evaporates more quickly, so your body produces more of it. We lose more moisture in our airways and lungs because we are breathing faster and more deeply than at sea level. This process is multiplied by exercise.
2. Visitors are off their normal schedule and without access to usual fluid sources. In addition, people tend to drink more alcohol on vacation, which is also dehydrating.
3. Low oxygen levels can cause mild nausea, causing people to eat and drink less.

These processes can easily result in a 50% increase in daily water losses, especially for someone who comes directly from a humid, low altitude environment. Your body realizes that it needs to start conserving water in its new, dry environment, but it takes several days for those changes to kick in. It’s during those first few days that proper hydration is especially critical. For the average healthy person, I recommend consuming 50-100% more fluids the first few days at altitude. The great majority of this should be in the form of water. If your appetite is small and you are eating less, you may want to add a sports drink like Gatorade. Anyone with medical problems like hypertension or heart disease should, of course, consult with their physician before a trip to altitude.

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