

HEALTH TIP: PREVENT ALTITUDE SICKNESS

By Dr. Dennis Lipton

Nothing ruins a vacation like illness. Yet, most people are unaware that almost 1 in 4 people will get symptoms of altitude sickness, or Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS), when they come to Vail, which is at an altitude of approximately 8,000 ft.

Take note: being young and fit is NOT protective! You may feel invincible, but in fact you are at higher risk of AMS.

AMS is more than just mild breathlessness and fatigue, which almost everyone experiences. Symptoms of AMS include severe fatigue, nausea, headache, weakness, and a general feeling of being unwell, often likened to a hangover. Although it generally resolves on its own in 2-3 days, prevention is still the best strategy:

1. **Ascend slowly.** In other words, if you are coming from sea level to Vail, try to spend at least one night at a halfway point, such as Denver (at 5,280 ft).
2. **Sleep at the lowest altitude possible.** You can ascend a few thousand feet during the day, like to the ski slopes. As long as you sleep at lower altitude, your risk of AMS will not increase.
3. **Stay well-hydrated** (preferably with water). Drink more fluids than you think you need, and eat light, especially for the first 48 hours at altitude.
4. **Avoid heavy physical exertion and alcohol consumption** 48 hours before and after you arrive at altitude.
5. If you know you are prone to getting altitude sickness, certainly comply with recommendations 1-4, but also **speaking with your doctor** about taking acetazolamide starting three days before your trip and/or using supplemental oxygen for the first few days you are at altitude.

A few last important notes: Altered mental status, chest pain, and severe shortness of breath are NOT typical symptoms of AMS, and should receive immediate medical attention. Anyone who takes medications for chronic conditions like diabetes, heart or lung disease, and high blood pressure can experience a potentially life-threatening worsening of their baseline medical problem at altitude. They should have a plan in place to monitor their condition and be ready to take action if needed.

Dr. Dennis Lipton is a board-certified internal medicine physician at Vail Valley Medical Center.