

# Altitude sickness

At altitudes above 2,500 metres, oxygen levels are lower. As you climb higher, both atmospheric pressure and the availability of oxygen decrease. This causes discomfort in the body, known as altitude sickness (or mountain sickness).

Its severity depends on the individual's state of health, the altitude, the rate of ascent, their activity level and their acclimatisation. It may be more severe in mountaineers with health problems or who have not acclimatised or trained beforehand, those ascending to greater altitudes or more rapidly, or those engaging in more strenuous physical activity.

Furthermore, altitude can exacerbate certain conditions: high blood pressure, heart disease, chronic lung disease, anaemia, etc.

The acclimatisation process generally takes 1 or 2 weeks: the body reacts by increasing heart and respiratory rates and red blood cell count. Once back at lower altitudes, acclimatisation is lost within approximately 1 or 2 weeks.

## What are the symptoms?

**Symptoms may include headache, nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite, tiredness and drowsiness. In more severe cases, there may be breathing difficulties, dizziness, unsteadiness, loss of coordination, altered consciousness and, ultimately, coma.**

## How can you prevent it?

- **Plan your trip in advance.** If possible, organise your itinerary so that you ascend gradually, allowing time for acclimatisation.
- **Ascend gradually** (500 metres a day) and descend to sleep at an altitude no more than 300 metres higher than where you slept the previous night.
- **Allow time for acclimatisation** before and during the ascent.

- **Prioritise a good night's sleep.** Getting a good night's sleep helps your body adjust to the altitude.
- **Take it easy with physical activity.** Avoid strenuous exercise during your first few days at altitude. Increase your activity levels gradually.
- **Stay well hydrated.** Drink plenty of water throughout the day. Avoid dehydration.
- **Avoid alcohol and sedatives.** Alcoholic drinks and certain medications can worsen symptoms. Avoid drugs that may interfere with respiratory function, such as sedatives and narcotic painkillers.
- **Eat light, balanced meals.** Opt for light meals rich in carbohydrates.
- **Wear suitable clothing.** Wear clothing appropriate for cold temperatures, as the cold can exacerbate altitude sickness.
- **If you have a chronic condition** consult your doctor before setting off. They will assess whether you need to take any preventive or emergency medication and will give you the necessary advice to help ensure your trip is a positive experience.

## If symptoms appear

- Rest and treat the pain with paracetamol.
- Do not resume the ascent until the discomfort has subsided.
- If symptoms persist, begin the descent immediately and seek medical attention.
- If symptoms worsen or serious symptoms such as breathing difficulties, unsteadiness or loss of coordination occur, proceed with an urgent descent.

