

The Air Up Here!

High Altitude Living and Recreation



Photo by D. West Davies

By Norm Vance

The rugged, primitive and high altitude San Juan Mountains give many people concern for their health when vacationing, hunting and living here. It is a natural concern. The body gives feedback that alerts one to the change of environment. Bones and muscles more used to concrete and carpet than rough terrain communicate through pain. The lungs find less oxygen in the air at this altitude and shortness of breath is the result. Other pains are a type of feedback and are also reasons for natural concern. The following is a discussion of the most common of these.

Go Equipped!

There are many medical situations created because of thoughtlessness in the area of being equipped for the environment. Local doctors often

see patients with injuries to the feet, ankles and knees caused by walking on trails in inadequate shoes and socks. Shoes with support and traction are a must for hiking in the forest, even on the most popular and improved trails. Good socks can prevent painful blisters. There are several good businesses where adequate shoes and socks can be purchased in Pagosa Springs.

The most likely places to find trouble by falling are places that are steep and wet but a person from less rugged terrain can do injury without falling or even knowing it. It is later in the evening or the next morning when ankles and feet start hurting and swelling from overexertion and stresses the body parts are not accustomed to. Start hiking short distances with a variety of terrain and build up to longer more difficult trails.

Important Tip

Everyone in your group should have a fishing license or buy a \$3 Colorado Outdoors Recreation

Search and Rescue Card. Even the least expensive fishing licenses come with a twenty five cent extra charge that covers the holder for all expenses involved in search and rescue. Even the smallest injury on the trail can require expensive help to get the patient out of the forest and this is the cheapest insurance you can buy.

Thin Air

Probably the most unique environmental factor we have here which can influence health is lower atmospheric pressure. In layman's terms, the air is thinner. This means that oxygen does not get into the blood as easily or readily as at lower altitude. This translates into more shortness of breath when exercising. It can mean serious trouble for those with poor cardiac health and even for an occasional healthy, conditioned individual.

Heart Disease

Coronary Heart Disease (CHD) remains the leading cause of death in the United States.

Cautions regarding heart disease:

1. At least initially, don't exercise harder here than you think you can at home.
2. Try to be in reasonable physical condition before you exercise at high altitude.
3. Take the first day or two easy as you test your reaction to the altitude.
4. If you are over forty and non-active, consider consulting a physician before undertaking any strenuous exercise.
5. If you have known CHD, expect it to be a potential problem at high altitude.

Altitude Sickness

Mild Shortness of Breath (S.O.B.) is a condition which is normal for those coming from lower elevation. It should be monitored but not worrisome unless it becomes more serious. Fortunately, serious S.O.B. is relatively rare and usually affects individuals who spend more than 24 hours continuously at elevations above 8-10,000 feet. It involves headache, nausea, anxiety and shortness of breath which is worse when one lies down. The problem is swelling of the lung tissue.

The treatment is to return to lower altitude immediately. The result of a severe or neglected case can be death. Headache and an often surprising degree of shortness of breath with exercise are common at high altitude. Do not worry that you have altitude sickness unless you continue to feel more and more short of breath, even at rest.

Hypothermia

Loss of body heat is dangerous and can be fatal. It can occur gradually and undetected. If it occurs more at high altitude, it is merely because

it generally gets colder than expected at high altitude. Many cases of hypothermia occur during seasons other than winter, at times when the ambient temperature is above freezing. They occur due to victim ignorance of the possibility of the condition. They are corrected by proper planning, the use of adequate clothing and avoidance of wetness and wind.

1. Wear or carry layers of adequate clothing in the Rockies! It can potentially freeze any night of the year, particularly at higher altitudes. When hiking you may sweat and moisten your cloths. If you then remove cloths to cool off you may cool too fast and hypothermia can occur. Cool off slowly.
2. Protect exposed parts including ears, nose, fingers and toes.
3. The victim of localized frostbite should rewarm the affected area with warm water (not above 110 degree only after danger of refreezing has passed..)
4. Frostbitten tissues should not be rubbed or otherwise traumatized. A person may gently hold the area for warmth but apply little pressure.
5. The victim of generalized hypothermia should be rewarmed with dry clothes and an external heat source which will not burn. A victim can be warmed by others laying in close contact, covering all when possible.
6. All victims should see a doctor. Significant generalized hypothermia can be manifested by a slowing of thought and movement: the victim may be irrational though calm. Shivering, if it occurred, will have stopped.
7. If you are in the forest and need to make fire use the lowest limbs on any pine or spruce tree. These limbs are long dead and usually bone dry so it is easy to build a quick and hot fire.

A problem often seen with hypothermia or another altitude-related sickness is that a person becomes injured or affected by a condition and does not want to cause the other members of the group to suffer so, he or she hides or down-plays the symptoms. Sometimes the person affected insists they are willing wait alone while the others finish the activity. People having any of these symptoms may be absolutely insistent they are fine and need no help because their thinking and decision making is compromised. Your group should pledge together to listen to each other and accept help before a hike or exercise begins.

Finally, always be careful and know your limitations. Most of all, have fun in Pagosa Country!

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