

TRAVEL TIPS

Troubleshooting health issues while traveling

By Lauren Mack | September 10, 2015



Nothing will put the brakes on a trip like getting sick or injured. Despite travelers' best efforts to prepare and prevent common ailments while on-the-go, it's inevitable that at some point you may need to troubleshoot health issues while traveling.

We spoke to doctors across the U.S. to get their tips for troubleshooting the most common health issues while traveling, from jet lag, blisters and jellyfish stings to sunburn, traveler's diarrhea and altitude sickness.

Common Ailments:

- Jet Lag
- Sunburn
- Traveler's diarrhea
- **Altitude sickness**
- Motion sickness
- Jellyfish sting
- Bug bites
- Blisters
- Upper respiratory infection (i.e. common cold)
- Cuts
- Muscle aches and pains
- Deep vein thrombosis

ALTITUDE SICKNESS

Avoid altitude sickness with these mile high tips. **Eric Johnson, MD**, associate medical director of travel risk and crisis management firm **Global Rescue**, is an expert in wilderness and altitude medicine and is a past president of the Wilderness Medical Society. Dr. Johnson serves on the Board of Directors of the Himalayan Rescue Association and is a founding physician at Mt. Everest ER, the medical clinic located at the Mt. Everest Basecamp. He shared this altitude sickness advice with us.

Pre-trip:

Pack the medicines you might need:

For a headache, you can take medicines such as aspirin, acetaminophen (sample brand name: Tylenol), or ibuprofen (sample brand names: Advil, Motrin).

There are also prescription medicines that should only be used under the guidance of a physician. These medicines can help treat the symptoms of acute mountain sickness. These include:

- Acetazolamide (brand name: Diamox): This medicine can help prevent and treat acute mountain sickness.
- Dexamethasone (brand name: Decadron): This medicine can help keep the symptoms of acute mountain sickness from getting worse and it can help prevent swelling of the brain. It is intended for very short-term use (a few days) and if used, descend immediately.

During the trip:

The best way to prevent altitude sickness is to avoid moving quickly to a higher altitude. Going slowly gives your body time to adjust.

- If you are traveling to a very high altitude, plan to stretch your trip out over several days.
- If you are hiking or climbing, don't do difficult physical activities for the first few days and avoid alcohol and sleeping pills.
- When hiking, go to a higher altitude during the day and then go back down to a slightly lower altitude each night to sleep.
- If you have had altitude sickness before, your doctor might give you a medicine to keep you from getting it again.

If you get altitude sickness:

Treatment depends on which type of altitude sickness you have.

Acute Mountain Sickness:

Acute Mountain Sickness is the most common and least dangerous type of altitude sickness. The symptoms mirror those of a bad hangover and typically start at 8,000 feet in elevation. Symptoms usually start within a day or two of traveling to a new elevation and can include:

- Headache
- Feeling tired
- Feeling lightheaded
- Loss of appetite
- Trouble sleeping
- Nausea, sometimes with vomiting

If you have mild symptoms of acute mountain sickness, rest and stay where you are until you feel better. Do not travel or climb to a higher altitude until you feel better and all symptoms resolve. Moving to a lower altitude can also help if symptoms do not go away in a day or two.



Image: Steve Hicks, The altitude starts to take its toll on Tom via Flickr CC BY 2.0)

High altitude cerebral edema ("HACE"):

This is less common but more serious than acute mountain sickness. It involves swelling of the brain and usually involves symptoms of AMS but with worsened brain symptoms (commonly an inability to walk in a coordinated fashion).

The symptoms of HACE (swelling of the brain) usually start one to three days after being at a high altitude. They include:

- Extreme tiredness and weakness
- Trouble walking normally
- Confusion and irritability
- Acting drunk

High altitude pulmonary edema ("HAPE"):

This is also less common and more serious than acute mountain sickness. It involves fluid build-up in the lungs.

The symptoms of HAPE (fluid in the lungs) usually start two to four days after traveling or climbing to a high altitude. They include:

- Coughing
- Feeling breathless, with worsening exercise tolerance
- Trouble walking uphill

When to seek professional help:

If you have severe symptoms after traveling or climbing to a high altitude, get medical attention immediately. Waiting for treatment could cause serious health problems or even death.