

## HEALTH EFFECTS OF HIGH ALTITUDE

Welcome to Summit County! At the high elevations of the Colorado Mountains, everyone is affected by altitude to some degree. As you go to higher altitudes, the barometric pressure decreases, the air is thinner and less oxygen is available. The air is also dryer and the ultraviolet rays from the sun are stronger. At elevations of greater than 8,000 feet your body responds by breathing faster and more deeply, resulting in shortness of breath, especially on exertion. Many people develop mild symptoms of headache, nausea, trouble sleeping, and unusual tiredness, which we call acute mountain sickness (AMS). These symptoms usually go away in a day or two. If symptoms are severe, persist or worsen, you should consult a doctor. **A short visit to a physician may save the rest of your vacation.**

High Altitude Pulmonary Edema (HAPE) is a more serious condition. This condition is recognized by a wet cough, increasing shortness of breath, and the feeling of fluid building up in your lungs. Another serious condition is High Altitude Cerebral Edema (HACE). Symptoms of this condition include disorientation, confusion, lack of coordination or difficulty walking. If you feel any of these symptoms developing you need to seek medical attention immediately. HAPE and HACE can be life threatening if left untreated.

The effects of high altitude can be decreased by following these recommendations:

- \***Increase Fluid Intake**-drink two or three times more fluid than usual: water and juices are best. Adequate hydration is the key to preventing altitude illness. You should drink enough fluids to urinate approximately every two hours.
- \*Avoid alcohol and minimize caffeine on your day of arrival and for one to two days thereafter. Be very careful if consuming alcohol; at this altitude, you may be much more sensitive to the effects of alcohol and sedatives.
- \*Decrease salt intake-salt causes your body to retain fluid (edema), which increases the severity of altitude illness.
- \*Eat frequent small meals high in carbohydrates, low in fat, and low in protein.
- \*Moderate physical activity and get plenty of rest.
- \*Medications and oxygen can help you feel much better. Diamox (acetazolamide) is a prescription drug which prevents the unpleasant symptoms for many people. Recent experience suggests that a small dose of Diamox suffices: 125mg in the morning before you are to arrive at altitude, again that evening, and each morning and evening for two days after arrival. It is generally well tolerated with few side effects. It should not be taken by anyone who is allergic to the sulfa class of medications. Some people may experience a tingling sensation in their fingers, toes, and around their mouth. You may also notice a subtle change in your sense of taste; specifically, carbonated beverages may taste flat. As with any medications, take only as directed and discuss any potential side effects with your physician.
- \*Spending 1-2 nights at a modest altitude of 5000-6000 feet, such as Denver, prior to arrival to Summit County, decreases symptoms when you go higher.
- \***Have fun and enjoy the mountains!!**

**St. Anthony Breckenridge CCEC is open for urgent care walk-ins and  
emergency care**

**Hours 830am-630pm 7 days a week from November 11, 2011 to April 15, 2012**