THE ARGYLE SURGERY

ADVICE TO TRAVELLERS TO AREAS OF HIGH ALTITUDE

Exposure to abrupt and dramatic changes in environmental conditions including travel to high altitudes can have a detrimental effect on the health and wellbeing of a traveller. It is not possible to predict how you may be affected individually but problems that are associated with travel to high altitude can be minimised by careful planning and by taking a few simple precautions.

What is considered high altitude?

Altitude starts to have an effect o the body at around 1,500 – 2,500m. Some people will experience mild symptoms of altitude sickness, like headache, nausea and fatigue at altitudes between 2,500 and 3,500m above sea level. This level of altitude includes some popular tourist destinations such as Cusco, Peru (3,000m) and La Paz, Bolivia (3,444m).

Will altitude sickness affect me?

It is not possible to predict who will suffer from altitude sickness, whilst it is not related to physical fitness certain pre-existing medical conditions such as anaemia, lung disorders and high blood pressure may make the effects of altitude more serious. If you have a pre-existing condition you should discuss the effects that high altitude may have on you with your doctor or nurse before you book your holiday.

It is important to remember that children have the same problems at high altitudes as adults.

What are the effects on the body?

As you travel higher, although the overall composition of air doesn't change, the decrease in air pressure means that there is less oxygen in each breath you take. Your body tries to compensate for the decrease in oxygen by taking more breaths and pumping blood round the body more quickly. Your body also begins to produce more red blood cells to carry oxygen round the body. However while the body tries to adapt and acclimatise to the higher altitude you may feel mildly unwell for a few days. Acclimatisation may take from one to four days.

The common symptoms of mild altitude sickness are:

- Headache
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Feeling tired
- Poor appetite
- Dizziness
- Poor sleep

Symptoms of mild altitude sickness are usually self limiting and should not interfere with normal activity, they normally resolve spontaneously if no further ascent is made. If you develop symptoms that make normal activity difficult you must alert someone immediately.

The effects of altitude on the body can be life threatening, causing fluid on the lungs or brain to develop. Symptoms of this include increasing difficulty in breathing, even at rest, dry cough, lethargy, difficulty in walking, loss of balance, confusion, possible unconsciousness and convulsions.

How can altitude sickness be prevented?

- It is not always possible to prevent altitude sickness occurring especially if your itinerary involves flying into a high altitude destination.
- Where possible avoid travelling to altitudes 3500m or more above sea level.
- Start below 3000m and take a graded ascent, acclimatise and rest regularly. Climb relatively slowly to higher levels and allow adequate periods of acclimatisation at a given height before spending a night at a greater height.
- If you go above 3000m, increase your altitude by no more than 300m per day, rest for a day every three days to acclimatise before moving on.
- If you feel ill at a particular height, do not climb any higher until your symptoms decrease. If symptoms increase, come down to your previously acclimatised height.
- Drink plenty of liquids (at least four to six litres a day).
- Avoid drinking alcohol.
- Avoid getting cold.
- There are some medicines which can help you acclimatise to altitude, but this should be discussed with your doctor.

Further information:
Altitude Physiology Expeditions (APEX) Information sheets www.altitude.org

Information sheets available from the British Mountaineering Council, The Old Church, 177-179 Burton Road, West Didsbury, Manchester, M20 2BB. Tel: 0161 445 6111. www.thebmc.co.uk

NATHNaC Travel Health Information Sheet Altitude Illness
www.nathnac.org/travel/factsheets/altitude.htm