

Altitude & Asthma

This factfile covers:

- What is altitude sickness?
- Are people with asthma more at risk of altitude sickness?
- How else do high altitudes affect people with asthma?
- What should people with asthma do?

Hiking, climbing and skiing are becoming increasingly popular activities, but people with asthma should consider altitude sickness and other factors when planning a trip.

What is altitude sickness?

- People who are not used to living at high altitudes can become unwell (known as altitude sickness) when they visit mountainous areas.
- While their body acclimatises to the shortage of oxygen they can suffer symptoms, including light-headedness, headache, fatigue, insomnia, palpitations, loss of appetite, diarrhoea and abdominal pain. Very rapid ascents may cause fluid to accumulate in the lungs, causing difficulty in breathing.

Are people with asthma more at risk from altitude sickness?

- Fit, healthy people with well-controlled asthma should have no problems coping with high altitudes provided that they ascend slowly and recognise and accept their limitations, adjusting their medicine if need be.
- It is possible that people with asthma are more likely to be affected by altitude sickness.

How else do high altitudes affect people with asthma?

- In freezing conditions, pressurised inhalers may not work properly. They should be warmed (eg in the hands) before use.
- People whose asthma is triggered by cold conditions might find that high altitudes are a problem, as the air temperature usually decreases at higher altitudes.
- Climbing can be strenuous and this may trigger exercise-induced asthma in some people. For more information see the Asthma UK factfile *Exercise & Asthma*.
- People whose asthma is triggered by the house-dust mite may find that their asthma improves, as the house-dust mite cannot survive at altitudes higher than 'the snow line'.
- People who fly directly into a place that is at high altitude will not have time to acclimatise and may experience problems. This should be discussed with a doctor. The altitude reached by aircraft should not pose problems for people with asthma.

What should people with asthma do?

- Discuss your trip with a doctor several weeks before your departure to allow time to work out a personal asthma action plan. This will include information on how to recognise when your asthma is worsening and what steps to take to avoid it.



Asthma UK Adviceline

Ask an asthma
nurse specialist

0800 121 62 44

asthma.org.uk/adviceline

Asthma UK website

Read the latest independent
advice and news on asthma

asthma.org.uk

Asthma UK publications

Request booklets, factfiles
and other materials with
independent, specialist
information on every
aspect of asthma

0800 121 62 55

info@asthma.org.uk

Asthma UK membership

Become a member of
Asthma UK and receive
Asthma Magazine four times
a year

0800 121 62 55

membership@asthma.org.uk

Asthma UK, Summit House, 70 Wilson Street, London EC2A 2DB

T 020 7786 4900 F 020 7256 6075

Asthma UK Cymru, Eastgate House, 35-43 Newport Road, Cardiff CF24 0AB

T 02920 430400 E wales@asthma.org.uk

Asthma UK Northern Ireland, The Mount, 2 Woodstock Link, Belfast BT6 8DD

T 02890 737290 F 02890 737289 E ni@asthma.org.uk

Asthma UK Scotland, 4 Queen Street, Edinburgh EH2 1JE

T 0131 226 2544 E scotland@asthma.org.uk