

HEALTH ADVISORY FOR PILGRIMAGE TO THE HOLY CAVE OF SHRI AMARNATHJI

The Holy Cave of Shri Amarnathji is situated at 13,500 feet atop the South Kashmir Himalayas. The high altitude trek to the Holy Cave involves exposure to extreme cold, low humidity, increased ultra violet radiations and reduced air pressure. Under these conditions, one of the common risks for the trekkers is the development of acute mountain sickness (AMS). AMS, which affects the brain and lungs, is known to occur when you ascend to altitudes over 8,000 feet (2,500 m). On the icy heights leading to the Holy Cave, you may find yourself being exposed to the following high altitude ailments of varying degrees:

Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS): AMS is the most common form of mountain sickness and may occur after you ascend to altitudes above 2,500 m. It is characterized by breathing problems, headache, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, fatigue, weakness, dizziness and difficulty in sleeping.

High Altitude Cerebral Oedema (HACO): HACO is a severe form of AMS and occurs due to swelling of the brain tissue which may eventually impair the brain. The illness often manifests itself at night and may result in coma / death within hours. Its symptoms include breathing problems, headache, fatigue, visual impairment, bladder dysfunction, bowel dysfunction, disorientation and partial paralysis.

High Altitude Pulmonary Oedema (HAPO): HAPO results in respiratory failure due to accumulation of fluid in the lungs. HAPO manifests itself at night (typically the second night of climbing in high altitude areas), progresses rapidly and may lead to fatality within hours. Its symptoms include shortness of breath even when resting, persistent dry cough, bright red stained sputum, weakness, fatigue, drowsiness, chest tightness, congestion and increased heart rate. Younger people are held to be more susceptible to this ailment as, in exuberance, they are inclined to over exert while trekking.

Do's for prevention of High Altitude Sickness

1. If you suffer from any pre-existing medical condition(s), it is important that you plan your pilgrimage to the Holy Cave only after prior consultation with your doctor.
2. You may be able to avoid high altitude sickness by giving your body adequate time to acclimatize. It is, therefore, advised that you don't over exert during the first 48 hours of arrival in the Yatra area.
3. You are strongly advised to ensure that you do not take any medicine which is not recommended by a qualified physician or doctor. Use of any medicines without proper medical advice can be harmful or even fatal in the high altitude conditions.
4. At higher altitudes, dehydration is common and results in headaches. Consumption of lot of fluids, say about 5 litres of water, juice, herbal tea etc. every day would be advisable.
5. You are advised to eat lot of carbohydrate rich diet during the pilgrimage. Carbohydrate rich food is considered to be a good guard against acute mountain sickness.
6. It is recommended that portable oxygen may also be carried on the pilgrimage; it is extremely beneficial, particularly for those who face difficulty in breathing.
7. If you suddenly develop AMS symptoms during the trekking, you should immediately descend to a lower altitude, to a place where you feel comfortable. You may also promptly put yourself on the prescribed medication and take oxygen. Efforts should also be made to contact the nearest medical practitioner / medical facility, stationed en-route by the Shrine Board, for further medical advice. Your trek should be resumed only on doctor's advice.
8. The mountains must be treated with respect and attempts to 'conquer' mountains or showing off physical fitness must be totally avoided. You are advised to walk at a steady and rhythmic pace, preferably in a group and not alone.

Don'ts for Prevention of High Altitude Sickness

1. You are advised to immediately acknowledge AMS symptoms, if and when they arise. Disregard of symptoms of any potential ailment, merely to avoid awkwardness with the fellow trekkers, can be lethal.
2. You are advised to avoid alcohol, caffeinated drinks, smoking, sleeping pills and strong painkillers during the trek and particularly ensure against any such consumption after the appearance of any AMS symptom.
3. The altitude at which you sleep on any night should not be at a place which is 300 m or more than the altitude of the place at which you slept on the previous night.
4. Do not fail to consume sufficient food and fluids. As you may suffer from loss of appetite at high altitudes, you should force yourself, if necessary, to consume adequate nourishment.