Traveling to High Altitude When You Have Sleep Apnea

What is sleep apnea?
Sleep apnea is a disturbance of control of breathing. Affected persons have repetitive breathing pauses during sleep but breathe normally when awake.

Are there different forms of sleep apnea?
The temporary cessation of airflow in sleep apnea may be due either to collapse of the throat (obstructive form of sleep apnea) or to a loss of the drive to breathe (central form of sleep apnea).

How do I know whether I have sleep apnea?
Typical symptoms of sleep apnea are excessive sleepiness, unrefreshing sleep, and nocturnal choking. You may consult your physician to discuss whether a sleep study should be performed to evaluate the possible diagnosis of sleep apnea.

How can sleep apnea be treated?
The most effective treatment for obstructive sleep apnea is continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP). CPAP machines apply air under gentle pressure to a patient's airway during sleep (see illustration). A special dental appliance that is snapped onto the teeth during sleep to hold the lower jaw in an advanced position is also effective and may be used if CPAP is not feasible (such as during mountain travel when there is no electricity).

Prevention
Travelers to high altitude (>2500 m/8000 ft above sea level) should ascend slowly and drink sufficient amounts of water. Sleeping altitude should be as low as possible. People with a history of severe altitude sickness should consult their doctor regarding the use of acetazolamide before traveling to a high altitude.

Patients with obstructive sleep apnea who travel to high altitude should continue to use their CPAP machine while traveling as they do at home. Such patients might benefit from preventive treatment with acetazolamide when staying at an altitude higher than 1600 m; they should consult their doctor about this possibility.

Patients with obstructive sleep apnea who do not use CPAP should consult with their doctor before traveling to high altitude about the potential use of CPAP and acetazolamide or a dental appliance.


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