ACUTE MOUNTAIN SICKNESS

What is it? Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS) is an illness caused by rapid ascent to altitudes about 7,000 feet. Symptoms usually start 6 - 24 hours after arrival and are worsened by preexisting colds and flue. Symptoms include headache, insomnia, fatigue, nausea, loss of appetite, and shortness of breath.

What causes it? Lack of normal atmospheric pressure seems to cause problems with normal breathing, blood flow, and sleeping - you may notice that you wake up at night feeling short of breath. For reasons that aren't totally clear, this leads to the symptoms of AMS.

How is it treated? Your doctor may prescribe oxygen for you to wear at night. You may also be given a medicine called acetazolamide (Diamox) to take once or twice daily. If you have a severe headache, you may be prescribed a medicine called dexamethasone (Decadron). The acute symptoms usually subside in a couple of days, and until then, you should rest, drink lots of fluids, eat a light diet, and avoid alcohol.

When can I ski/snowboard again? Your doctor may want you to pass the "Rule of 100's" before you are cleared to ski/snowboard:
1. a pulse less than 100 per minute
2. a temperature less than 100 degrees
3. diastolic blood pressure (the "bottom number" of blood pressure) less than 100
4. an oxygen saturation greater than 90%

What do I look out for? AMS rarely develops into a more serious form. If you experience worsening shortness of breath, especially if associated with a cough, chest pain, increasing sputum, confusion, or problems with balance, you should go to the doctor and be seen immediately.