

Heed warnings when exercising at altitude

By Sammy Caiola, Sacramento Bee

The thin dirt road to Round Top Peak lurched up toward the distant ridge line, teasing me with the promise of alpine lake views as I climbed the mountain's face one heavy step at a time. I was physically fit – or so I thought – and I had lugged my 40-pound backpack up and down plenty of mountains. So why did I feel so utterly exhausted?

Altitude sickness, as I found out, can be a roadblock even for the most confident hikers. Having grown up at sea level and hiked mostly in the Sierra foothills, my only elevated fitness experiences involved gliding down the slopes of Lake Tahoe ski resorts. So when I set my eyes on the 10,400-foot Round Top Peak in the Carson Pass Management Area last spring, I didn't know I'd be feeling light-headed and gasping for air like a dry fish just a few miles into the trip.

Fortunately I stopped my ascent before the point of collapse, but plenty of adventurers have paid the price for exercising above their limits. Altitude illness affects 25 percent to 85 percent of travelers to high altitudes, depending on their rate of ascent, home altitude and other risk factors, according to the American Academy of Family Physicians. Severe cases of altitude sickness can result in death.

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