

UIAA Mountain Medical Centre Information Sheet 11

ORAL CONTRACEPTIVES & HIGH ALTITUDES

Introduction

Doctors and patients often ask advice about whether oral contraceptives (OC's) should be used at high altitudes. Various different opinions have been expressed about this; some practical advice follows:

Above 6500 metres

In general terms nearing the level of extreme altitude above 7000 metres it is prudent to avoid anything that could provoke fluid retention, increase blood clotting or possibly make the more serious forms of Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS) worse. In general terms therefore I would not recommend that women take an oral contraceptives in these circumstances, though there is no absolute reason to give why they should not.

Modest altitudes below 5500 metres

There are anecdotal suggestions that AMS is worse in women taking oral contraceptives but no very good evidence to support this. In addition, the OC's have sometimes been blamed for episodes of cerebral (or pulmonary) oedema. Again the evidence for this is sketchy.

There is cumulative evidence of very many women who have taken OC's on trekking and climbing holidays both in the Alps and at higher altitudes, with no particular unwanted effects noted regularly. Vomiting if suffering from AMS might reduce the efficacy of an oral contraceptive.

The UIAA Mountain Medicine Centre is supported by:

*Mount Everest Foundation
Foundation of Sport and the Arts
British Mountaineering Council
International Union of Alpine Associations (UIAA)*

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Updated October 2002
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