Prevalence of the “Screaming Barfies” Among North American Ice Climbers

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Introduction.—Ice climbers endure severe cold to scale vertical walls of rock and ice by gripping tools for prolonged periods with hands overhead. Seasoned ice climbers have described a phenomenon known in North America as the “screaming barfies,” consisting of hand pain, nausea, vomiting, hearing loss, vision loss, and/or dizziness. The exact cause is unknown.

Objective.—Previously described in the United Kingdom, we aimed to estimate the prevalence of localized and systemic symptoms among North American climbers.

Methods.—Data were collected by online and paper surveys. Online surveys were distributed via Facebook and American Alpine Club regional e-mail listservs. Paper surveys were distributed at an ice climbing gym in Michigan. Microsoft Excel was utilized for descriptive statistics.

Results.—One hundred forty-six surveys were completed. Respondent age ranged from 19 to 67 years (median 35). The average ice climbing experience was 6.3 years, averaging 29 climbs per year. Eighty-one percent of respondents reported developing symptoms; 61% reported hand pain, 58% numbness, 52% tingling, 68% throbbing, 56% aching, 41% nausea, 5% vomiting, 11% dizziness, 18% irritability, and 7% muffled hearing. The average symptom severity score was 5/10. Symptoms lasted 1 to 5 minutes in 73% of subjects, with 6% reporting symptoms >10 minutes in duration. Sixty percent reported symptoms occurring during the first climb of the day. Respondents reported symptoms occurring less than once a day 48% of the time, with 19% reporting daily symptoms.

Conclusions.—Based on these results, a large percentage of ice climbers develop symptoms while climbing. Symptoms typically are localized, with a lower percentage of respondents reporting constitutional symptoms, the most frequent being nausea and dizziness. Only 5% of subjects reported vomiting, suggesting that the original term, “screaming barfies,” is a misnomer. This syndrome appears highly prevalent, suggesting that further investigation is warranted to discover the etiology and subsequent prevention strategies.

Preparedness and Reliance on Technology Among Climbers and Skiers in White Mountain National Forest

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Background.—White Mountain National Forest (WMNF) attracts nearly 1.7 million visitors annually and contains New Hampshire’s tallest mountain, Mount Washington 1917 m (6288 feet), which has claimed over 140 lives. Despite educational campaigns that aim to increase the preparedness of outdoor recreationalists, numerous search and rescue (SAR)

missions costing over \$250,000 are required annually in New Hampshire.

Objective.—Describe the preparedness of winter recreationalists in WMNF, focusing on level of experience, use of emergency gear, and reliance on technology, with the aim of better targeting interventions to reduce injury and SAR events.

Methods.—A cross-sectional convenience survey was administered in March 2017 at Pinkham Notch in WMNF. It contained 32 items relating to demographics, wilderness/medical experience, emergency gear, and reliance on technology. Adult skiers, splitboarders, hikers, and climbers comprised the study group.

Results.—One hundred forty-eight individuals completed the survey (88% response rate). The majority (57%) were skiers, and the most common age group was 20 to 29 years old (51%). Fourteen percent of individuals carried all 10 essential items, and 63% carried 7 or more essential items. The most common reasons for omitting these essentials were as follows: deemed not necessary (62%), others group members carried them (26%), or forgotten (10%). Eighty-seven percent of individuals carried technological devices, including 72% with cell phones, 27% with avalanche transceivers, and 7% with satellite messengers. Twenty-three percent had previously used a technological device for rescue, and 60% had no backup plan if their technological devices failed.

Conclusions.—Although the preparedness of winter recreationalists in WMNF is highly variable, on average it remains low. Most notably, many individuals rely heavily on technological devices and lack essential gear for emergencies. Although limited experience and high cost of equipment are likely partly responsible for this, aiming educational interventions at these groups may help increase preparedness and reduce SAR events in the future.

The Epidemiology and Medical Morbidity of Long-Distance Backpackers in the Sierra Nevada

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Background.—The John Muir Trail (JMT) is a 355-km (220-mile) trail in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. There are few reports on long-distance backpackers, and none in the Sierra Nevada.

Objectives.—To survey medical issues and demographics of JMT hikers.

Methods.—Using online and onsite recruitment, hikers completing the JMT in 2014 were directed to an online 83-question survey.

Results.—Of 771 respondents, 92.8% completed all medical and demographic questions. The majority (59.3%) of respondents were men. The average age was 43 years (SD=14), and ranged between 13 and 76 years. Hikers completed their trips in an average of 15.2 days (SD=7.6) and travelled an average of 273±130 km (169±80 miles; mean±SD). Hikers lost an average of 3.5 kg (7.7 lbs), with an average drop in body mass index of 1.1. Weight gain (3.6 kg [8 lbs]) was reported in 12% of respondents. Blisters (67%), sleep problems (57%), and pack