

## Ways to avoid altitude sickness in Cusco

At high elevations—above 8,000 feet—the air is “thinner,” meaning there is less pressure, so while the oxygen percentage remains the same, the air is less dense, so each breath you take contains less oxygen than what you’re used to. To counteract this, your body will, at first, need to breathe faster and pump blood more rapidly in order to take in the same amount of oxygen it is accustomed to receiving. For many people, this comes as a shock to the body, causing various symptoms.

## Symptoms of Altitude Sickness

- Dizziness, lightheadedness
- Headaches
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea or constipation
- Difficulty breathing
- Heart racing

## Important Things to Note

- There isn't really a "cure" for altitude sickness, other than descending back down to a normal elevation.
- Cusco is at 11,152 feet (3,399 meters). Machu Picchu is significantly lower at 7,972 ft (2,430 m). Altitude sickness generally starts affecting people at 8,000 feet or higher, so Machu Picchu isn't really the potential problem—Cusco is. Everyone who goes to Machu Picchu must pass through Cusco. Flights land here. Buses from Lima stop here.
- **Take it easy.** This is seriously the easiest—and most ignored—piece of advice for avoiding altitude sickness. Remember, your body is trying to get accustomed to the lower amount of oxygen it's getting; therefore it is of utmost importance that you take it easy the first few days you are in Cusco. Don't go on hikes or long walks. Don't put any excess stress on your body—it's already working overtime to oxygenate your blood!
- **Take deep breaths.** Again, your body is trying to get oxygen, but there is less of it available in each breath. So take deep breaths to try to get more air in.
- **Avoid alcohol.** The reasons for this are debated, but certain studies show that the effects of alcohol are

enhanced at high altitude (i.e. You get drunk more easily). Also, alcohol may exacerbate the effects of altitude sickness. Hold off on the Pisco Sours for the first couple of days you're in Cusco.

- **Drink lots of water.** This may not alleviate altitude sickness exactly, but sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between altitude sickness and dehydration, and high elevations tend to be very dry, meaning you need more water for proper hydration.
- **Bring chlorophyll drops. (Yep, chlorophyll as in the green stuff from plants.)** This one took me by surprise! I had never heard of this treatment until I met a couple on the train from Machu Picchu to Cusco. They told me they had brought a small bottle of chlorophyll drops they'd bought at a natural health store back in the States, and they put a few drops in their water every day and never suffered any ill effects from the altitude. The idea behind this natural treatment is that the chlorophyll increases the amount of red blood cells in your system; the more red blood cells there are, the more opportunities there are for oxygen to be absorbed, thereby reducing the effects of altitude sickness. On my second trip to Cusco, I brought **these Vitamin Shoppe Liquid Chlorophyll Drops** and mixed a few drops in with my water—it turned my poop green, but it wasn't bad at all. I never got sick from the altitude on the second trip (other than a mild headache), so maybe it helped! If you're

worried about green teeth or the taste of the drops, you can get **chlorophyll soft gel caps** instead.

- . **Drink coca tea.** Oh my, coca. You will find it everywhere in Cusco. Let's clarify a few things: Yes, coca is the plant from which cocaine is made. However, coca leaves alone are not potent enough to be anything near to resembling the illegal drug; so yes, it's totally safe to drink coca tea. However, don't drink more than four or five cups, or else you could suffer heart palpitations. For my airline peeps who are randomly drug tested please don't worry.