Wilderness and Environmental Medicine, 26, (2015)

General Medical Considerations for the Wilderness Adventurer: Medical Conditions That May Worsen With or Present Challenges to Coping With Wilderness Exposure.

Cushing, et al.

This month’s Wilderness Medicine meeting used a review article to spur an interesting conversation. This was more of a top-of-the-mountain review highlighting chronic illness that people may have, and how it affects their ability to perform in the Wilderness. It also highlighted many conditions that may acutely worsen while participating in activities at the extremes of altitude, temperature, underwater depth, and exertion.

The article breaks down certain common chronic medical conditions by body system – cardiovascular, pulmonary, GI, neurologic, musculoskeletal, psychiatric and hematologic conditions. For example, COPD may become exacerbated with inspiration of cold, dry air while hiking at high elevation.

While the article was rather light on hard recommendations or specific monitoring parameters, rather, it created discussion points for wilderness health care providers.

With better and better treatments for osteoarthritis (total joint replacements), CAD (stents and antiplatelet medications), and thromboembolic disease (anticoagulants), we have a “healthier” cohort of people with serious chronic illness. Naturally, these people want to participate in their usual recreation activities, including expeditions, climbing, paddling, hiking, biking, skiing and the like.

As providers, however, we need to remember that we are not taking care of our usual experienced outdoorsmen and women in phenomenal physical condition, rather, a group of potentially frail people.

The article describes the importance of pre-expedition evaluation and preparation, especially discussing contingency planning in case of emergent illness or trauma.

Certainly food for thought when providing emergency care in the rural, remote, and austere environments….