Decompression Sickness (Bends)

Decompression sickness is also known as “the bends”. It is seen mostly in divers who have been under water for too long and at too great a depth. It is caused when the body has been exposed to high pressures and gases in the blood have time to dissolve in the blood. When the diver comes to the surface and the body is not under pressure, the gasses that were dissolved start to come out of the blood as bubbles. This causes the condition known as the bends.

DIAGNOSIS

The history along with the problems (*symptoms*) of chest and joint pain, shortness of breath, and uncontrollable cough are enough to make this diagnosis. There may also be headache, dizziness, and confusion, which in extreme cases may progress to shock, paralysis, coma and death.

TREATMENT

This is a medical emergency. Treatment requires oxygen, fluids given in the vein (*intravenously*) and prompt transfer to a *hyperbaric* (recompression) chamber.

PREVENTION

It is best to closely **observe your dive tables and watch your dive times** carefully. Plan your dives and depths before making them. Also, remember that dive tables were tabulated using young healthy divers who are in good shape. If you are not young and in shape, it is best to err on the side of caution when planning your dives. If this is done, this emergency can be avoided.

Approximately 75 percent of patients with decompression sickness develop symptoms within one hour. Ninety percent of patients develop symptoms within 12 hours of surfacing. Only a small number of people become symptomatic more than 24 hours after diving. Scuba divers should wait 12 to 48 hours before flying on a commercial airliner, depending upon the length of their diving exposures, to avoid decompression sickness in a diver who has subclinical gas bubbles.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You develop problems moving your arms or legs or difficulty with walking.
- You lose control of your bowels or bladder.
- You experience memory loss or visual disturbances.
- You develop chest pain, wheezing, or shortness of breath.
- An oral temperature above 102° F (38.9° C) develops.

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