



Preventing the Freshman

5
10
15
40

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Well, it is that time of year again! Young adults are back in school, and for many, this is the beginning of their college career. They are college freshmen, and with that comes new experiences, independence, new routines, more responsibility and demands, and for some, the freshman weight gain of 5, 10, 15 or more pounds.

The “Freshman 15” as it is commonly known, is a real phenomenon. It is not always 15 pounds; sometimes less, sometimes more. It is, however, an issue for many college students (not just freshmen). For those who enter college with weight problems to begin with, it can spell health disaster.

For those venturing off to college for the first time, the experience is one of new beginnings and transition during which they break from familial routines and establish independence. No longer are their parents and elders around to provide guidance and limitations on lifestyle choices. They do what they want, when they want, with whom they please and that includes eating and drinking.

While some students may stock up on fruits and veggies, and even snag some to take back to the dorm room for later, the vast majority does not pay attention to what their bodies

College Freshman Weight Gain has Several Root Causes:

- Eating late at night
- Eating unhealthy cafeteria food
- Keeping unhealthy snacks and food on hand in the dorm room
- Drinking excessive amounts of alcohol
- Energy drinks
- Cheap food coupons and offers
- Fast food delivery to dorm rooms
- Skipping meals
- Lack of exercise
- Poor nutritional skills and education
- Poor sleep habits and sleep deprivation
- Not understanding what their bodies need nutritionally to be healthy

need, and that includes many of the student athletes. Even if a student is trying to eat healthy, they are almost always not educated enough about nutrition to see the hidden fats, sugars and other additives and ingredients that are going to contribute to weight gain and additional health problems. Unfortunately, dining halls and cafeterias aren't really looking out for them in that respect either, and students' health suffers.

The Experts Weigh-in

According to assistant clinical professor of nutrition, Ruth Reilly of the University of New Hampshire, "this is a very understudied population. They're very hard to reach." She notes that large phone surveys of this age group, such as one conducted by the Centers for Disease Control in 2003, generally do not reach students at college or on cell phones, so we have had a hard time understanding the nature of weight gain and obesity in this late high school to college age population. In the last few years, however, interest has increased, and studies have started to yield some interesting information.

But, it didn't tell us much about what was happening to them when they got there. In order to assess the weight gain of Cornell University first semester students, nutrition sciences and psychology professor David Levitsky assembled a study sample of students taken from two large introductory courses for freshmen.

Each was weighed at the beginning and end of their first 12 weeks of college, and each filled out a questionnaire about eating, exercise and sleeping habits. The college freshmen in the study gained an average of 158 grams (about 5 1/2 ounces) per week. That's the equivalent of ingesting about 174 more calories a day than energy expended. Dr. Levitsky concluded that the amount represents a relatively small change in behavior, yet it has enormous cumulative consequences on weight.

What Does this All Mean?

The good news? The "Freshman 15" is more like 5 to 7, but it is followed by the "Sophomore 2 or 3." So college students are actually gaining less than 15 pounds, *on average*, but of course the study didn't detail findings for those coming into the study already overweight or obese. Additionally, they are not taking that weight off in their second year or later.

Doctors commenting on the studies say it is good news that the number of pounds gained is less than the widely believed 15, but bad news that "Generation XL" kids seem to be learning patterns of gradual weight gain that could spell trouble way beyond graduation. The National Institutes of Health reports that the *conservative* obesity estimate of persons aged 18-29 is 19.1 percent.

Social Effects on Obesity and Weight Gain

Students are not only gaining weight and developing poor habits and behaviors because of diet and exercise, but in addition they are becoming heavier simply as a result of who they choose to have as friends, and how their family behaves as well.

Although not aimed directly at college students specifically, Drs. Christakis and Fowler of Harvard Medical School mounted an impressive study of more than 12,000 people of all ages who were tracked for 32 years. The study concluded that obesity is partially a result of voluntary choices or behaviors, but people are embedded in social networks and are influenced by the appearance and behaviors of those around them as well. This suggests that weight gain in one person might influence weight gain in others.

The study reported that a person's chances of becoming obese increased by 57 percent if he or she had a friend who became obese in a given time period. Among pairs of adult siblings, if one sibling became obese, the chance that the other would become obese increased by 40 percent. Persons of the same sex had relatively greater influence on each other than those of the opposite sex.

Obesity appears to spread through social and familial ties. Having obese social contacts might change a person's tolerance for being obese or might influence his or her adoption of specific behaviors (e.g., smoking, eating, and exercising). So, the study shows us that for all of us, college students included, the environmental factors, food and movement behaviors, friend choice and family members can all have an effect on weight gain.

Research suggests that rather than recruiting friends to help with weight-loss, it may be a better strategy to recruit friends of friends who help establish contacts to members of other networks so that the cycle is broken. The researchers reported that their simulations show many traditional weight management plans fail because they only target overweight and obese people without consideration for their surrounding groups and wider social network.





A Mayo Clinic study concluded in 2004, reported the number of overweight kids from ages 12 to 19 increased from 11 percent to 17 percent from 1994 to 2004, meaning more overweight students are heading to college than ever before.

The popular strategy for dieting with friends is shown to be an *ineffective long-term* weight-loss strategy, whereas dieting with friends of friends or individuals outside any known network can be somewhat more effective by forcing a shift in group boundaries. So, if you or a college student you know are gaining weight, don't rely on your friends to help you out of the jam. Broaden your circle of friends, meet new people, and establish some new groups to help balance the group(s) that helped you into the pickle in the first place.

Health and Other Effects of College Weight Gain

The foods each of us chooses can have a profound effect on energy, concentration, and memory because the body and brain need appropriate nutrition to function properly. Unlike adults, nutrition for young people must provide for physical growth and development, especially during the years up to age 19 during which peak bone mass occurs, setting the stage for strong bones for the rest of our lives.

Additionally, this age group tends to take in an overabundance of refined sugars, unhealthy fats, cholesterol and sodium. College students tend to eat foods that taste good, are easy to grab, or that friends are eating. Those foods tend to be convenience, processed foods that are low in nutrition and high in fat, sugar, sodium and calories. These foods provide some nutrition, but it is not the quality nutrition young bodies need.

A body failing to operate at peak efficiency is going to spend energy trying repair itself and compensate for deficiencies, rather than providing appropriate energy and nutrients so that the brain and body can operate effectively.

The relatively small increase in calories a student takes in each day or week has the profound cumulative effect of adding a significant amount of weight over the years. Experts are worried because they say this sudden weight gain sets the stage for serious health problems linked to obesity, including diabetes, heart disease and most types of cancer.

If overweight or obese students continue on this path, they are expected to be much more of a health burden at age 50 than their parents will be.

Although obesity has been identified as a serious public health issue, other research indicates the harmful effects extend far beyond physical health. As many students gain weight, their self-confidence drops, and they become more self-conscious and aware of the weight they've put on. This can take away more energy from studying because depression or anxiety about weight gain leads to a feeling of loss of control, which can lead to more eating as a way of soothing the anxiety or depression.

The eating and depression cycle becomes unmanageable. Combine that with the other environmental and social factors, and the lack of activity, and one can see how college weight gain can spiral out of control in only a couple of short years.

Focusing on weight gain also equates thinness with health which is an incorrect concept ingrained in our society. For example, a woman who is by all accounts thin, but who has some very unhealthy food behaviors, smokes, and does not exercise, is almost universally considered to be healthier than the woman who is larger, may have some body fat, eats a nutritionally sound diet, exercises, and doesn't smoke. Why is that?

Researchers suggest that we should stop focusing on anyone's weight gain as just being socially unacceptable, and "gross," and instead put the emphasis on making possible and reasonable attempts to live a healthy and positive lifestyle.

2008 research by Delinsky, et al., showed that about two thirds of the study's female college students reported at least a moderate concern about the "Freshman 15," which was connected to concern about their shape and weight. In addition, 2002 research by Graham, et al, has shown that women who worried about the "Freshman 15" had a more negative body image and higher scores on the Eating Attitudes Test, a measure of eating disorder symptoms.

Prof. Crosnoe, who ran a University of Texas study, states that obese girls, besides being more likely to skip school, are "more likely to consider committing suicide, use alcohol and marijuana, and have negative self-images." In any of these instances, academic studies are adversely impacted. How students perform academically is often related to how they fit in socially, and how they relate to others. Freshman weight gain and obesity can have a profound effect on both.

TIPS on How to Nip it All in the Bud

Whether you're a college freshman, college student, graduate student or parent of a student, here are some tips to prevent school-related weight gain. If you don't need them, pass them along to a student who might benefit.

Make it about health, not about looks, image, or anything else. Value yourself enough to care about your health and your own well-being. Make the majority of food choices because they are good for you, will make you feel good, and will make you stronger and healthier. You deserve it.

Don't skip meals. Your body needs food to fuel your brain, your immune system, and everything else you require to be a successful college student. Skipping meals starves your body of fuel to run your engine, and you may develop headaches, lethargy, lightheadedness and you won't be able to concentrate. Pack a healthy portable snack like fruit, a granola bar, or a yogurt.

Eat a good breakfast. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day because it breaks a "fast" of 5-9 hours without giving the body food. Studies show that skipping breakfast detracts from academic achievement. Again, pack a portable breakfast like a bagel, yogurt, fruit or at least some juice. Skip the fast food breakfast sandwiches. You don't need all the extra fat, carbs and calories.

Avoid eating unhealthy cafeteria food. This one is sometimes a little harder to do, especially since many college cafeterias don't really offer much in the way of healthy options. Try to combine foods from different areas of the cafeteria, like adding a grilled chicken breast to a salad, or veggies from the salad bar to a sandwich or a wrap.

Avoid eating food late at night. Try to arrange your schedule so that you aren't up late studying or doing homework. Make getting the work done a priority that supersedes play or relaxation. The more tired your body gets and the less you respond with sleep, the more it will convince you that you are hungry rather than tired. Pay attention to your body. Even a half hour catnap will help.

Don't give in to cheap food offers. Every college campus is littered with offers for \$5 large pizzas, cheap sandwiches, and a host of other fast, processed foods that can be delivered to your door. Although the deals are great, don't give into temptation. If you must eat junk food, choose wisely and try for the most nutritious thing you can find.

Don't keep unhealthy snacks in your room. The campus is filled with unhealthy, but good-tasting, junk foods, so promise yourself that your room will become a healthy haven from that madness. Keep good-for-you things in the same area in which you study and sleep.

Snacking while studying leads to mindless eating. You're studying, and the next thing you know you've rifled through a bag of chips. Instead of snacking while studying or reading, promise yourself a small snack at scheduled breaks. Your blood sugar will remain more stable, your eyes and brain will thank you, and you will avoid potentially thousands of calories per week.

Check your fluids. Sometimes what we think is hunger is actually thirst. The body will take fluid in any form, even out of food. Stay hydrated throughout the day. Sodas, juice drinks and sports drinks are loaded with sugar, which can add up to extra pounds. If you drink alcohol, keep in mind that it supplies lots of calories, but no nutritional value. Instead, drink plenty of water.

Go for variety. Variety is the spice of life and a key to not getting bored with your food. Shake it up. Just because you *can* eat ice cream everyday doesn't mean you *should* eat ice cream everyday. Eat different foods and keep things interesting. You'll get more nutrients and balance your diet.

Watch your portions. Americans love to super size everything. Try not to eat a serving of any particular food that is bigger than the palm of your hand (except bananas). Learn what a proper portion is, and try to pare down.



Don't linger. You can hang out with friends in the dining hall after eating, but that keeps you grazing on food you don't need. Without rushing through your meal, leave the food area as soon as you have finished. This goes for restaurants too. The more food is available and tempts you, the more you will rationalize that you are hungry.

Limit sugar and HFCS. Sugar is sugar and HFCS is high fructose corn syrup. Despite what the commercials tell you, it really can't be eaten in moderation because it's in everything! Read labels, ask if foods contain HFCS, and avoid it when you can. Watch out for foods like ketchup, BBQ sauce, breads, yogurt and salad dressings. Yep, it's in there. Watch the sugar intake as well, it and HFCS just go to fat, and makes you even hungrier.

Watch fat intake, especially trans fats. Learn the difference between good fats and bad fats. Trans fats and saturated fats are bad fats. Fried foods have either trans fats or at least saturated fat. Watch fat intake and ask questions in the dining hall about fat content. Limit where you can without totally eliminating fats. You need some fats to be healthy, so look for monounsaturated fats or polyunsaturated fats.

Get lots of quality protein. That does not mean hamburgers everyday, or even red meat everyday. Try to vary it up – chicken, fish, pork, red meat, turkey, ham, beans, dairy and eggs are all sources of quality protein. Sliced sandwich meats can be okay, but watch the sodium content and check for HFCS. Yep, sometimes it's in there.

Eat your fruits and veggies. Don't do it because mom tells you to do it. Do it because you choose to do it for your own good health and well-being.

Change your food habits and philosophy. Don't think of foods as inherently good or bad. No food is really off limits, but moderation, portion control and limiting how often you eat the food are the keys. Every little calorie or fat gram is not what you should focus on. Instead, focus on trying to keep your diet balanced and varied.

Avoid lots of late nights – get lots of sleep. Studies have shown that sleep deprivation and poor quality of sleep are significant factors in weight gain. Be good to yourself and get at least eight hours per night. If you need to, give yourself permission to take short naps.

Walk to class and events. Is class too far away to really walk it comfortably? Walk part of the way and then promise yourself you'll catch the bus the rest of the way. Or, walk there and take the bus back. Try for at least 5,000 steps per day. Ten thousand would be even better! Get a pedometer to help you work in extra steps.

Take advantage of exercise facilities. Make new friends at the gym, tennis court, pool, track, or other exercise facilities. If you hate the word exercise, think of it simply as movement. Do something you enjoy like dancing, Wii fitness, or playing basketball. Join an intramural team and have fun.

Conclusion

If you are a parent of a college student, make sure your freshman knows about nutrition and what their body needs. Give them this article and encourage them to learn more by going online. There are great Web sites out there, including many offered by the government. The American Dietetic Association has good info, as do many state and university sites. Learn more.

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OAC Membership

Building a Coalition of those Affected

The OAC is the **ONLY** non profit organization whose sole focus is helping those affected by obesity. The OAC is a great place to turn if you are looking for a way to get involved and give back to the cause of obesity.

There are a variety of ways that you can make a difference, but the first-step is to become an OAC Member. The great thing about OAC Membership is that you can be as involved as you would like. Simply being a member contributes to the cause of obesity.

Why YOU Should Become an OAC Member

Quite simply, because the voice of those affected needs to be built! The OAC not only provides valuable public education on obesity, but we also conduct a variety of advocacy efforts. With advocacy, our voice must be strong. And, membership is what gives the OAC its strong voice.

**JOIN
NOW**

Complete the below application now!
For more information, visit the OAC Web site at www.obesityaction.org.

Membership Categories and Benefits

The OAC wants **YOU** to be a part of what we do. No matter how you're impacted, having individuals join our efforts who believe in making a difference is essential. That's why the OAC offers various member categories, so you can get involved at your desired level.

Several valuable benefits also accompany your OAC membership. Each membership category offers something different. Here are some of the core benefits to membership:

- Official welcome letter and membership card
- Annual subscription to the OAC's magazine
- Subscription to the OAC's members-only monthly electronic newsletter
- Periodic member alerts informing you of issues that need action/attention
- Ability to lend your voice to the cause
- Representation through advocacy

Membership Application

Yes! I would like to join the OAC's efforts. I would like to join as a/an:

- Individual Member: \$20/year
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Mail to: OAC
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Tampa, FL 33614

Or Fax to: (813) 873-7838

Name: _____

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Payment Information

Enclosed is my check (payable to the OAC) for \$ _____.

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Credit Card Number: _____

Expiration Date: _____ Billing Zip Code: _____