



How to Prevent the Freshman 15

By Bryan Miller, Health

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So many first-year college students gain unwanted pounds that the so-called Freshman 15 is the subject of a new MTV reality show. But the phenomenon, say experts, is probably a misnomer. According to a 2008 study in the journal *Eating Behaviors*, female college students who gain weight during their first year actually gain an average of 7 pounds. That extra flab, however, usually comes with a decrease in muscle mass and physical activity, a boost in alcohol consumption, and a wholesale change in eating habits from healthy foods to those high in sugar and fat. One study found that 71 percent of freshmen and seniors failed to meet federal dietary recommendations for fruit and vegetable intake.

"College is a critical time for people to create good or not good eating habits," says the lead researcher of the *Eating Behaviors* study, **Sherrie Delinsky, Ph.D.**, a psychologist and eating disorders expert at **McLean Hospital**, in Belmont, Mass.

Other research shows that one-third of kids are overweight to begin with. Plus, the prevalence of obesity is growing fastest among 18- to 29-year-olds—and among those with some college education. Intervention now, say experts, is key to setting up patterns for good health later in life. Here's how to start the process:

Structure your eating habits

Nadina Bourgeois, 24, packed on 15 pounds her first year at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, and added another 10 to 15 over four years. She blames her "weird" schedule for her expanding size. "Some days I'd wake up at 1 p.m. and go straight to class, and other days I'd be up at 8:30 a.m.," she says. "There was no way to plan ahead—especially when it came to meals." Delinsky suggests that fitting three meals and two to three snacks into each day can keep your eating habits on track and your calorie intake under control.

Don't overdo your dining plan

Campus dining rooms encourage an all-you-can-eat mentality. Counter it by filling your plate with at least 50% green stuff, suggests Frances Largeman-Roth, R.D., the senior food and nutrition editor at *Health*. It can be fresh salad, cooked veggies or a combo. Then pick up a piece of grilled chicken or a burger without the bun from the grill. The remaining 25% of your plate should be filled with a whole grain such as steamed brown rice, whole-wheat bread or, if your college is really with it, quinoa salad or tabbouleh. "And steal a couple pieces of fresh fruit to bring back to your dorm room," she says.

Avoid peer pressure

Just because everyone else from your Intro to Psych study group heads to the local pizza joint after class doesn't mean you have to join in the feeding frenzy, says Largeman-Roth. "Either join in and keep it to two slices plus a salad (eat the salad first to fill up), or take a rain check," she says. "It's easy to overdo it when you're with your friends—especially if beer is flowing."

Watch the liquid calories

Speaking of beer, liquid calories add up quickly! That's often part of the reason why people gain the first year. "Not only does alcohol contain a lot of calories, but people also make poor food choices when they're under the influence," says Delinsky. Alternate with water and diet soda and try not to get so drunk that judgment is impaired.

Plan for cramming

When you're trying to stay awake and focused, studies show that chewing gum can help, and the sugar-free kind is virtually free of calories. "But when you just need those chips or cookies to get through an all-nighter, keep the damage down by buying single-serving packs," advises Largeman-Roth. "An entire bag of chips can do anyone in when they're stressed."

Keep your dorm free of junk food

Although you don't need a stocked kitchen in your dorm, it helps to keep on hand yogurt, fruit and granola bars with at least 2 to 3 grams of fiber per serving and no more than 10 grams of sugar, such as TLC Chewy Granola Bars from Kashi.

Take a course on healthy eating

In one study, adding a nutrition science course to a student's curriculum was an effective intervention against weight gain. If that's not possible, make an appointment with your campus nutritionist for advice on maintaining or losing weight.

Weigh yourself daily

A 2006 study by Cornell University researchers suggests that daily weight-monitoring can be a useful tool for keeping college weight gain in check. Arax-Rae Van Buren, 24, who gained 20 pounds her first year at Arizona State University, agrees that nutritional education and self-monitoring would have helped her. "I gained the weight so fast I still have stretch marks on my inner thighs," she admits.

Join the gym

Many students swap high school sports for college studies, and they end up burning fewer calories. Delinsky suggests they check out the campus gym. "The campus gyms are amazing and they are high-end," she says. "They have really fun offerings—rock-climbing, yoga, and it can be a great way to socialize without eating."