

How to Avoid the Freshman 15

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November 30th marked the due date for California college applications. Having a child who is about to venture into the most exciting years of his life, I'm outwardly confident of a mother's wisdom but secretly hope that I have taught him well. Like any parent, I want what is best for my child and I want his transition to college to be as easy as possible. College, as I am beginning to fully realize, is not a week-long camp experience. In fact, from this point forward, I will be lucky if my college student stays home for a week. Therefore, whatever knowledge he needs to survive must be cemented into his brain before he walks on that campus next fall. Being a college freshman is the first step to independence; it is a time when he will make his own decisions and be responsible for them. He will have to determine everything from taking the right classes to what he will eat. While he awaits the outcome of his applications, I wondered what words of wisdom I can bestow on him and other soon-to-be college freshman. Turning to what I know best (and that would be nutrition), the best gift I could provide is a set of guidelines on how to avoid the freshman 15.

Unfortunately, the freshman 15 is not an urban legend. The number represents the number of pounds that a typical freshman gains the first year of college while living away from home. There is something about living away from home and the freedom of not having someone to tell the students to eat their vegetables that affects their body size. But do freshmen actually gain fifteen pounds? Researchers examined the weight gain of college freshmen attending Cornell University. They discovered that the average weight gain in the first twelve weeks of the semester was about four pounds. Some quick math will tell us that if they keep this rate up, by the end of the school year, the freshmen could easily gain ten pounds. A more recent study done on a larger number of college freshmen showed that the average weight gain was three pounds in fifteen weeks. However, 23% of the participants gained more than or equal to 5% of their starting weight. The average weight gained for this group was about ten pounds (in fifteen weeks). By the end of the second semester, they may have gained another ten. Thus, fifteen pounds (some gain less and some gain more) actually represents the average weight gained by freshmen.

What is really the cause of the freshman 15? Based on the study conducted on the Cornell students, 20% of the weight gain was due to the all-you-can-eat meals served in the dining hall. Twelve percent of the weight gain was tied to the consumption of high fat foods while another twelve percent was due to evening snacking. The younger the freshman, the more weight they were likely to gain. This is understandable considering that older freshmen are more likely have experienced life on their own before entering college. Thus, they may have learned ways to deal with their newfound freedom (and stress) before engaging in campus life. The group that gained weight consumed on average an excess of 174 calories a day beyond their needs. This may seem like an insignificant amount of extra calories to have consumed, but when it is repeated day-after-day, week-after-week, little by little, the weight begins to pack on.

According to the researchers, there are other reasons for the potential weight gain. Students are usually less active in college than they were in high school. Approximately sixty-percent of the new college students who have gained weight admitted to performing less physical activities and were less likely to participate in vigorous exercise most days of the week. On the other hand, only forty-percent of the group that did not gain weight admitted to less physical activities. The combination of less physical activity and the slight increase in calories intake adds up to weight gain. In addition, many colleges and universities required freshmen to live on campus. Living on campus is also identified as a risk factor for weight gain. This could be related to eating more meals in the college dining halls (with the all-you-can-eat buffets). Unfortunately when people are presented with more food, they tend to eat more, regardless of hunger. Female freshmen tend to gain more weight than their male counterparts. Why? It seems that women snack on more junk food than men. Students who gained weight were likely to drink more alcohol, consume more calories, eat fewer vegetable servings, eat slightly more junk food, and have fewer hours of sleep than the group of students who did not gain weight. All of these combined negative factors will lead to weight gain.

Almost one in four freshmen will return home in the summer with the freshman 15. The transition from living at home to college is significant for weight gain. No longer under the family schedule or rule, college students have to regulate themselves and may adopt lifestyle habits that promote weight gain. Many freshmen will test their newfound independence by eating and drinking what and when they want. Gone is the constant reinforcement from well-meaning parents to choose food wisely. Students tend to eat what tastes good and that could mean doubling up on desserts and skipping the vegetables.

It is important to note that the incidence of sophomore or junior 15 occurs but is less common. Typically these upper-classmen are wiser because they have learned from their (eating) mistakes of freshman year. Many live off-campus and are now responsible for preparing their own food. Thus, the all-you-can-eat cafeteria style meals are no longer available to them and there is less temptation to eat excessively. Living off-campus, food is no longer “free” and they only eat as much as they can afford. Living alone or with a few roommates, the upper classmen seem less likely to *party* and drink alcohol as much as on campus where partying on the weekend is a ritual. There is also less opportunity to eat late at night simply because someone on the floor ordered pizza. Thus, living off-campus removes many of the environmental cues to overeat.

How can a freshman avoid the freshman 15?

- First, enroll in an introductory nutrition class during the first semester. (Okay, that is totally a plug, but it certainly wouldn't hurt.) The problem with living on campus is that there is no one there to tell the freshman what and how much to eat. By getting educated on nutrition, the student could have a better understanding of what is needed and how to eat a balanced diet.
- Second, avoid overeating. This may seem hard to do considering that the dining facility can be a feeding frenzy. There is an abundance of food and a large

variety to choose from. However, there are simple guidelines to keep in mind when eating in the dining hall. Limit the time spent in the cafeteria. The longer a student lingers there, the more he/she will eat.

- Third, use the dinner plate as a guide. One half of the plate should be filled with vegetables and fruits. One quarter should be whole grains and the last quarter should be made up of lean meat or a vegetarian option.

The students must realize that they are in control of what they eat. They need to review the menu and make a decision on what to eat and stick to it. When a student is unsure on what to eat, he/she may end up selecting too many different foods. Select items that are not prepared with extra fat or cream. Do not be afraid to ask the service line person how the food is prepared or if it can be served without added fat or sauce. The student must learn to be their own advocate. Select grilled or baked over fried foods. Likewise, select whole grain products over refined grains. Opt for the low-fat or non-fat milk (or soy milk) instead of whole milk. The difference between whole and low/non-fat milk is the fat and calorie content, not the nutritional value. (In the state of California, non-fat milk actually has more protein than whole.) Select water over sweetened drinks and fruits instead of sweetened desserts. Most importantly, eat a variety of foods but eat food in moderation. Be aware of the portion size and ask for half a portion if it exceeds the plate guideline outlined above.

Another guideline is to implement an active lifestyle. For majority of the student population, the only physical activities they participate in are walking to class and sitting in class. Thus, they are no longer burning as many calories as they did before they lived on campus. Make plans to work out, run, jog, or cycle in the college gym with friends on a regular basis. On most campuses, access to the gym or workout room is free or offered at a significantly reduced rate to students. Join an intramural sport to help stay active. This is also a great way to meet new people. By getting friends involved, students can help each other to stay in shape and avoid the weight gain.

Avoid late night eating. Of course, if insufficient food has been eaten all day then by all means, a sensible meal at night is suggested. The pattern you don't want to establish is eating all of your meals and then eating again late at night. Going to college doesn't mean never having late-night pizza. However, to avoid weight gain, stick to - one or two slices and have it only occasionally. The same thing should be said about keeping unhealthy snacks in the dorm room. When the student is bored, tired, or even hungry, they will snack on the food that is readily available. The typical snacks found in dorm rooms are cookies, candies, other sweets, chips, crackers, and high fat/sodium/calorie microwaveable foods. Instead, opt for fresh fruit, low sodium canned soup (broth type), carrots, pretzels, low fat yogurt, low-fat popcorn, and low sugar breakfast cereal.

Alcohol is readily available on most college campuses. Aside from the fact that alcohol consumption under the age of 21 is illegal and it can create many health problems, it is also high in calories and provides no nutritional value. A six ounce glass of wine, an ounce of liquor and a can of light beer are approximately 100 calories each.

Consuming excess alcohol will also mean an excess in calories leading to weight gain. My recommendations are abstinence or limiting the amount of alcohol consumed.

Research shows the freshman 15 is real and new students on campus should be aware of it. However, by following the guidelines, the extra weight can be avoided. Students have the ability to make the right decisions, especially if they are provided with the information necessary. This fall, as my son sets foot on a campus, I will hope that I have provided him with all the essential tools to make the right choices.

Resources:

Levitsky, DA, Halbmaier, CA, Mrdjenovic, G. *The freshman weight gain: a model for the study of the epidemic of obesity.* International Journal of Obesity. 28 (2004): 1435-1442

Wengreen, HJ, Moncur, C. *Change in diet, physical activity, and body weight among young-adults during the transition from high school to college.* Nutrition Journal, 8:32 (2009).