

HEALTHY FOOD FOR HEALTHY LIVING

Nutrition



THE FRESHMEN 15? OR MORE LIKELY THE SENIOR 16?

Many students have heard about the dreaded "Freshman 15", the idea that many college students gain approximately 15 pounds of weight during their first year of college. However, most research shows that college students typically do not gain this amount of weight their first year. What the research does show is that freshmen typically do gain some weight, approximately 4 to 5 pounds during their first year, but not the 15 pounds so often rumored. However, 4 to 5 pounds of weight gain may not sound like very much, but it is a significant amount of weight compared to typical weight gain of most high school students. However, poor dietary habits gained during the first year of school may lead to continued patterns of poor eating habits; and these habits can contribute to significant weight gain by graduation time.

SO WHY DO MANY FRESHMEN GAIN WEIGHT?

For starters, the first year in college can be quite a transition and can be very stressful. Stress has been shown to increase hunger for many individuals; for those who are under stress, it has been shown that it is easier for the body to store and maintain fat. During the freshman year, students are often thrown out into the "real world" for the first time. Many students who live on campus are now given new tasks of preparing their own meals with limited resources, have limited access to food, and possess limited skills and knowledge about cooking and nutrition. Because of these limitations, many students choose to eat out. There is a significant amount of research that shows that individuals who eat out consume about 200 more calories per meal than if they eat at home.



Students may have an even greater challenge choosing low calorie and healthy foods while eating on campus. There are fewer inexpensive healthy options and eating at the dining hall or cafeteria, where it is an "all you can eat" affair, can truly pack on the calories if pulling an "all-nighter."

Another factor that can contribute to weight gain includes a decrease in physical activity. Many students had opportunities to play sports in high school as well as to participate in physically active programs, such as dancing, cheerleading, and hiking. When individuals go off to college, they often lose their social networks and are tasked to create new ones. Making new friends can take time and can be stressful; thus, students may find that they are no longer as active as when they were in high school. Suddenly, freshmen now find themselves in front of a computer more often, with increased workloads.

SO WHAT SHOULD I BE EATING?

Dietary recommendations vary from person to person, and they are based on age, activity, gender, weight, and height. Most college students concerned about their weight focus on calories and fat and forget about everything else. However, it is important to recognize that an individual must eat enough of the different kinds of macronutrients (proteins, fat, and carbohydrates) as well as consume an adequate amount of micronutrients (vitamins and minerals). Micronutrients assist in the breakdown of energy consumed in the form of macronutrients; thus the energy consumed can not be used adequately if a person does not consume enough micronutrients. Most Americans consume too many overall calories and are often deficient in many micronutrients including folate and other B vitamins. These are important to maintain a healthy and general heart health. One easy way to remedy this problem is to focus on fruits and vegetables. Fruits and vegetables are typically low in calories and high in micronutrient content. Try to eat at least one serving of vegetables with each meal in the day. Some research has shown that when people replace animal sources of protein with plant sources of protein, they tend to weigh less and reduce their risk of developing obesity-related chronic illnesses.

Also, when choosing fruits and vegetables, choose the most colorful options, particularly dark green leafy vegetables and deep orange fruits and vegetables. The pigments found in colorful fruits and vegetables, also known as phytochemicals, have been shown to reduce the risk of chronic illnesses including many kinds of cancers. Fruits and vegetables contain a significant amount of fiber, and fiber has been shown to



make an individual feel full for a longer period of time and thus can displace the calories found in high calorie foods.

HOW MUCH SHOULD I WEIGH?

It is important not to focus only on weight, but to focus on an overall balanced diet and health. There are some simple indicators to help an individual assess if they are at risk for developing diseases related to overweight and obesity. One of the more common indicators is Body Mass Index or BMI. BMI is an index that takes a person's height and weight into account.

The formula for BMI is:

Weight (pounds)/ Height² (inches) x 704.5

Where:

Underweight: BMI < 18.5

Normal weight: BMI = 18.5 – 25

Overweight: BMI = 25 – 30

Obese: BMI > 30

Another index that has been shown to be correlated with risk of chronic illnesses is waist circumference. People who have a high waist circumference typically have a greater amount of abdominal fat, often associated with a greater risk of chronic disease. Risk is found to be high for those that have a waist circumference greater than 40 inches in men and greater than 35 inches in women.

HOW CAN I LOSE WEIGHT?

Much of the research regarding weight loss has shown that people who lose weight very slowly (approximately 1/2 pound to 1 pound per week) lose more weight and maintain that weight loss longer than those who lose weight more rapidly. So, when losing weight, it is important to focus on making small changes that will decrease your caloric intake, but increase your total nutrient density. For example, replace one meat meal a week with a vegetarian dish. It takes about 3500 excess calories to make a pound of fat



in the body. To lose one pound per week, you need to decrease your caloric intake by 500 calories per day. Another way to decrease caloric intake is to exercise more; however, recognize that to lose weight you need to both exercise and decrease calories. The new Food Guide Pyramid suggests that adults should be physically active about 60 minutes each day. This activity does not necessarily need to be done in a gym each day, but should be incorporated into lifestyle activities, such as taking the stairs rather than the elevator.

You should recognize that weight loss is not a continual and smooth process. Most people lose a couple of pounds easily, then may gain back a pound, then may lose a pound, then may plateau; however, over time, weight can be lost, with a continued plan. Much research has shown that people can improve their diet by keeping a food diary that lists the foods, the amounts, where, when, and mood. Monitoring your food intake and mood can help you find times of the day when you tend to eat less healthy or eat more food, so that you may try to intervene at those points. Another tip that has been found with successful dieters is to gain some kind of social support, such as an exercise group or sports team.

CONCLUSION

In addition to this advice, students can learn more about healthy eating and monitor their diet and physical activity through one the USDA's website, www.mypyramid.gov. This website provides a program that allows an individual to track their diet and compare their intake with recommended amounts. Students are also encouraged to take a nutrition course as part of their academic program!

While freshmen may be at risk for gaining a few pounds, recognizing that their new environment may contribute to that risk is also important. By taking measures to prevent stress, improve physical activity and diet, students are more likely to avoid significant weight gain. By taking action early on, you promote healthy behaviors that may prevent continued weight gain throughout college and after graduation.

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