

The “Freshman 15”: Fact or Urban Legend?

You’ve heard the ominous prediction – all freshmen will pack on a hefty **15 pounds** during their first year of school. But is it true???

Several recent research studies conducted on campuses around the country found that not all first-year college students gain weight and, for those who do, the average weight gain is about 4 to 6 pounds during their first semester. In fact, about 1/3 of the students in the studies **lost** weight during the first 12 weeks of classes.

Why do students gain? The researchers found that stress, too much choice (also known as the “cafeteria diet”); late-night munching, too little sleep and too little physical activity all contribute to weight gain.

A 4 to 6 pound weight gain is not that big of a deal. But if the trend continues over the college years you may put yourself at risk for developing health problems such as diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease and cancer in the near future. To avoid gaining extra freshman (or sophomore-to-senior) pounds there are several easy strategies you can follow:

- ❖ **Be active every day.** Walk or bike to destinations as much as possible, take the stairs, check out the campus recreation center or join an intramural sports team or walking group. Thirty to forty-five minutes of moderate activity **daily** will keep the pounds off and decrease stress levels.
- ❖ **Eat breakfast.** The first meal of the day (even if it’s at noon) shifts our bodies from the resting state to an active state. Research shows that “breakfast eaters” are more alert at school and work, ingest more vitamins and minerals, and have lower body weights. Don’t be skimpy – eat at least 25% of your daily calories (400 – 600) at breakfast. Good choices include: whole grain cereal with skim milk, nuts and fruit; whole wheat toast and peanut butter plus 100% juice or milk; eggs, whole wheat toast and yogurt.
- ❖ **Make your dorm room or apartment a “healthy-eating” environment.** Refined and processed foods are usually high in fat, sugar, calories and salt with few vitamins and minerals. Replace chips, snack crackers, cookies and candy with fresh veggies and fruit, plain popcorn, instant oatmeal, string cheese & yogurt, canned soup with veggies and canned turkey chili. Try and avoid late night pizza deliveries and the vending machines - they contain high calorie, less satisfying, expensive snacks!
- ❖ **Drink fewer calories.** Consuming regular pop, sugary fruit drinks and smoothies, coffee drinks made with whole milk and sugary flavorings and

alcoholic beverages (beer, wine or hard liquor) can add a lot of calories with little nutrition. Also, research shows that beverages have little “filling effect” and people eat the same amount of food whether they drink water (0 calories) or 32 oz. of pop (440 calories). Your best drink choices are water, fat-free or low-fat milk, black, green or herbal teas, and plain lattes or cappuccinos made with low-fat milk.

- ❖ **Make your diet colorful.** Fill up on colorful vegetables and fruits. These foods are filling, low calorie and full of nutrients. The bright colors in fruits and vegetables (red, orange, yellow and green) are the different phytochemicals in these foods. Phytochemicals are naturally occurring plant compounds that help prevent cancer, heart disease and the effects of aging. The goal is to eat at least 2 servings of fruit and 3 servings of veggies daily.
- ❖ **Eat out less often.** It is well-documented that people eat healthier at home. Restaurant portions are too large and too high calorie for most of us. One fast-food “super value” meal can have most of the calories needed for an entire day. When eating out, **order SMALL** – the small burger, the small fries, the small drink (or better yet, order milk or water) OR take half of the meal home for another day.
- ❖ **Cruise the cafeteria** to make good meal choices. Students should take **small** portions of meat & starches like rice or pasta and take **larger** portions of vegetables. Include a piece of fruit, a glass of milk or water and a small dessert. Don’t go back for seconds for at least **20 minutes** after finishing the first plate – it takes that long for your brain to get the message that you have eaten.
- ❖ **Make eating a pleasurable experience.** Too often we eat in a rush and never experience the pleasure of eating. Eat mindfully - always put your food on a plate and eat sitting down, NOT in front of the TV or computer. Try and eat at a relaxed pace so you can experience the sensual qualities of food (aroma, taste, texture and temperature). Eat when you are “gently hungry” rather than “frantically hungry” so you can slow your pace and savor each bite. Only eat what you really like rather than eating something just because it’s there. Dining is more than consuming food – enjoy spending time with others!

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