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Outsmarting the “Freshman 15”

By Carol Ann Brannon, MS, RD, LD

College freshmen are anxious and excited to be on their own; no parents overseeing their daily routines or monitoring what they are eating or drinking. Campus life includes late-night snacking, lots of pizza and soda, “all you can eat” cafeteria buffets, sleep-deprivation, and often a lack of structured physical activities or exercise. Consuming an extra 200 to 400 calories each day can translate into a 7 to 15 pound weight gain by the end of the first semester. There is no disputing the fact that a significant number of freshmen gain weight; whether it is 5, 10, 15 or more pounds. However, collegiate weight gain does NOT have to be inevitable. Here are 10 strategies for outsmarting the “freshman 15.”

1. **Eat Breakfast** to restart metabolism, improve cognition, and avoid possible overeating later in the day. On-the-go options include a whole grain mini bagel with cream cheese or peanut butter with a yogurt beverage OR a banana or apple with peanut butter added for protein OR a piece of fruit and string cheese. These items can be easily stored in a dorm room.
2. **Eat Slow and Control Portions:** Pay attention to how fast and how much you eat. Fill half your plate with non-starchy veggies or salad, one-fourth of your plate with grains, and one-fourth with a lean protein. As a rule of thumb a handful (the size of the palm of your hand) is a gracious portion size for grains, fruits, veggies, and the

tip of your thumb is the correct size for salad dressings, nuts, and other condiments. Take advantage of the college or university's online nutrition information to assist with portion and calorie control.

3. **Engage in Exercise:** Take advantage of the college intercollegiate sports program and fitness center that have a wide variety of exercise equipment and offer fun fitness classes like Zumba. Schedule exercise time like a class with mandatory attendance! Daily exercise (30-60 minutes) will prevent weight gain and reduce stress.

4. **Drink Mindfully:**
 - Drink WATER throughout the day.
 - Energy drinks, like Red Bull, can be harmful, even deadly if consumed along with alcohol.
 - Choose non-fat/low-fat milk (1 cup = a serving) at meals.
 - Limit or avoid calorie-loaded coffee drinks, smoothies, juices, sports drinks, and alcohol.
 - The legal drinking age is 21; know the risks of alcohol consumption. Remember "moderation" is a concept that teens are unable to grasp as the brain is not fully developed until the mid-twenties. Thus, alcohol consumption is risky resulting in impaired judgment, an excess of calories, and possible addiction.

5. **Enjoy More Fruits and Vegetables:** build your meals around whole grains, vegetables, and fruits; choose broth-based vegetable soups rather than cream soups; start with a colorful salad, but go easy on the dressing, croutons, olives, and other high-fat salad bar items.

6. **Include Dairy Foods Daily:** Studies suggest that 3 to 4 daily servings of *low-fat* dairy products can help adjust the body's fat-burning machinery and reduce body fat storage. Calcium is also important for bone density and prevention of osteoporosis later in life.

7. **Eat Mindfully:** follow an eating schedule and avoid “grazing” or continuous eating throughout the day.
8. **Snack Sensibly** on whole foods like whole grain crackers, cereals, popcorn, nuts, fruits, veggies, and low-fat yogurt and cheese.
9. **Get your ZZZZs** (sleep): Students need 8½ to 9 hours of sleep nightly. Sleep deprivation is linked to weight gain.
10. **Limit Non-Essential Screen (computer, TV, IPod, etc.) time** to 2 hours or less each day.

College life can be overwhelming; putting some students at risk for excessive weight gain or developing an eating disorder. Check out the resources available at your student’s college or university as many employ Registered Dietitians to provide nutrition counseling. Outsmart the “Freshman 15” by being proactive and employing these strategies.

Resources for College Students:

The College Student’s Guide to Eating Well on Campus by Ann Litt, MS, RD, LD
(Tulip Hill Press)

The Healthy College Cookbook by Alexandra Nimetz, Jason Stanley, & Emeline Starr
(Storey Press)