

Freshman 15: Weight management at university

The prevalence of obesity and type 2 diabetes are increasing worldwide, and we are now seeing more people developing type 2 diabetes at a younger age. Consequently, they are more likely to develop complications and related comorbidities if not treated. Childhood obesity is also on the up and healthcare resources are increasingly being used to tackle this issue; however, obesity and type 2 diabetes in university students is a neglected area. Approximately two-thirds of students gain some form of weight over the first year of university (Vadeboncoeur et al, 2015). The phenomenon of weight gain in the first year of university has been referred to as the “Freshman 15” – gaining 6.8 kg or 15 lbs in the first year of studies (Brown, 2008). However, a recent meta-analysis has shown that the average weight gain may not be as high as this (Vadeboncoeur et al, 2015). An increase in weight may lead to a higher risk of developing weight-related medical problems, such as polycystic ovary disease, facial hirsutism and irregular menstrual periods among young women.

There are number of reasons why university students gain weight, particularly so in the first year of studies (Gores, 2008):

- Change in dietary behaviour.
- Lack of cooking skills.
- Excess alcohol intake.
- Reduced physical activity.
- Poor sleep hygiene.
- Anxiety or depression.
- Problems with relationships.
- Lack of accountability.

A change in environment and the demands of university living can have a significant impact on the mental and physical health of students. Students are stereotypically known for their preference of fast foods, which are energy dense, and many students tend to skip breakfast to get to early morning lectures. The anecdotal image of students involves late nights and excess alcohol

intake, which can take its toll on sleep hygiene. Poor eating and sleeping habits, coupled with increasing demands to have an active social life and maintain a consistent academic performance can all lead to students neglecting their health.

How can we address this issue to improve the health and knowledge of students at university? Incorporating the following strategies into student life could improve general health and wellbeing and prevent weight gain and the onset of weight-related conditions, such as type 2 diabetes:

1. Increased physical activity.
2. Online healthy eating advice.
3. Help with cooking skills.
4. Easy access to healthy food with in-house kitchen.
5. Use of social media to improve self-esteem and confidence.
6. Free and easy access to a gym.

Investment in improving the health of university students could prevent the development of obesity and its related comorbidities in later life. All universities should work with their local public health organisations and clinical commissioning groups to use the available resources when necessary and appropriate. ■

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Gores SE (2008) Addressing nutritional issues in the college-aged client: Strategies for the nurse practitioner. *J Amer Acad Nurse Pract* 20: 5–10

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