

# How can I avoid gaining weight in college?

## Avoiding the Freshman Fifteen

*Sara H is home for the summer, having gained twelve pounds at Connecticut College. She is determined to use the gym and lose the weight before September.*

*John P. shows his friends the beginning of a “beer belly” that he grew while at the University of Miami. Really not proud of it, he’s determined to work it off over the summer and get his six pack back.*

*Rachel E. is secretly glad to be home from college because her Mom still makes her eat breakfast and vegetables. While she played varsity Soccer and Lacrosse at MHS, she dropped them in college and is sure this contributed to her fifteen pound weight gain. Mom’s rules might help her get back in shape.*

*Jean R. is getting her last checkup and shots before college and is wondering what to do to avoid the “Freshman Fifteen” she heard about at the Senior Seminar day at MHS this Spring.*

**What is the Freshman Fifteen anyway?** Didn’t it used to be Freshman Five? Then it was Freshman Ten? Now we are warning students about gaining fifteen pounds during their freshman year of college. What happened?

Why do freshmen gain weight anyway? The simple answer is that it’s simple math: more calories in and/or less exercise. But it’s not that simplistic. And why has the amount of weight gain increased over the past ten years? What is going on?

Experts believe that there are multiple factors involved. Many of these factors contributing to weight gain are operating in the general population as well. College students are not alone in becoming overweight and out of shape. Factors that contribute are:

**Changes in routine:** late night pizzas ordered in when the best idea would be a piece of fruit or a good night's sleep

**More snacking on unhealthy foods:** disruption in routine means grabbing food in between meals, usually not the most nutritious choices

**More convenience foods:** vending machines are ubiquitous as are high fat, high sugar foods and drinks available at franchises and kiosks on many campuses

**More stress:** food is one good antidote to homesickness, blues, stress over work and relationships. When this becomes a habit, the pounds add up.

**Supersizing:** Huge portions of foods and especially sweetened drinks can mean gigantic intakes of straight sugar.

**Mindless eating:** eating while sitting around talking, eating while studying, eating in unusual venues all contribute to eating that is not savored or “counted”

**More impulse foods:** again, the ubiquity of machines, coffee stalls, and a variety of dining options make it easy to eat on impulse

**Increased alcohol intake:** legal or not, the majority of students will experiment with alcohol often completely unaware that alcoholic beverages are high in calories, especially when prepared with sweet mixes

**Less exercise:** even those who played on teams in high school often opt for club sports or exercising on their own. It sometimes takes a semester or two to figure out a new routine

**Poor choices in the dining halls:** many college cafeterias are operated by big food franchises and the food is canned or frozen, often sweetened or high in saturated fats.

## **What can you do???**

### **Eat Breakfast!**

Eating breakfast jumpstarts metabolism. If it seems too far to the dining hall, try getting creative in your room. Many students have a small

refrigerator and a microwave in their rooms. Keep fruit, granola and granola bars. Keep fresh milk and yoghurt (a long shelf life) and try making eggs in the microwave. Seriously. But I would recommend trying this at home first before inflicting exploded or burnt eggs on your roommates. Instant oatmeal also makes a great microwavable breakfast or snack.

### **Exercise Often and Learn to Relax without Alcohol!**

Try to get 30 minutes of aerobic exercise each day. This acts as a magical anti-depressant during the winter months, keeps you in shape and keeps you healthy to fend off the inevitable flu, mononucleosis, strep throat and viruses that hit freshmen in college.

Join a club sport; run with dorm mates, bike around campus, try a new kind of exercise—often free of charge on campuses. Pilates, yoga, aerobics, water polo, volleyball, Frisbee are a few of the options.

Also, learn to breathe and meditate for stress reduction. It burns calories.

### **Balance Hi and Lo Fat foods:**

Pay attention to what is fried and greasy—fries, chips, tacos, chicken wings, pizza. Fat is all over the place. Have fruit often. Not juice. FRUIT.

### **Stick to eating routines:**

Three meals a day. Healthy snacks. Easy. But hard to do. Avoid food after 9pm. Breakfast, breakfast, breakfast. Start now!

### **Lay off the alcohol and substances**

Consider the calories in alcohol and what happens when you get the munchies. A six ounce pina colada has 350 calories on average. Beware of the “mixes” for mixed drinks. They are heavy on sugar. Drink water, not power drinks.

### **Go veggie, but go wisely:**

Weight management is very difficult without protein in your diet. Two palm size servings/day will help control cravings.

Following is a list of snack items that are worth having in the dorm room:

Ginger snaps

Carrots

Instant sugar free hot chocolate  
Instant oatmeal  
Cold cereal with milk  
Oranges, apples, grapes, melon  
Protein bars  
Granola bars  
WATER

Parents should remember that there is nothing like receiving a care package from home with cookies or a fruit and nut bread (banana, carrot, zucchini). These keep for a long time in the refrigerator and one slice provides a dense and nutritious breakfast.

Finally, it's not a bad idea to take along a copy of The Complete Idiot's Guide to Total Nutrition by Joy Bauer (third edition, New York: Alpha Books). It's friendly and fun and chock full of information that students can share and learn.

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