Dear Alice,

HELP! I'm terrified of the Freshman Fifteen! How do I not put on the weight during my first semester?

I have to go now, the school dining service is about to close and I need a donut!!

? Hopelessly hungry

Answer

Dear Hopelessly hungry,

It's true that some students put on weight when they first come to college, however this is not a universal event, nor a foregone conclusion. For many first year students, it's their first time away from home, making choices about what to eat, how much, and how often. On top of this, many college students eat in cafeterias, where meal options are abundant and portion control can be a daunting task. Students may also be facing new challenges and situations that lead them to eat for reasons other than hunger ? such as coping with stress, loneliness, or even hanging out and having fun late at night with friends.

It is possible to eat varied and well-balanced meals at your school's eateries, with a little planning and sticking to some healthy habits. Besides what you choose to eat, watch how much you eat as well, because calories count and can add up quickly. Here are some sample meal ideas:

Breakfast

- Low- or nonfat yogurt with fresh fruit or cold cereal
- Cold cereal (especially whole grain varieties) with skim milk
- Hot cereal (such as oatmeal)
- Waffles with fruit
- Whole grain toast

Lunch

- A sandwich ? choose lean meats (such as fresh roasted turkey, roast beef, or ham),
grilled or fresh veggies, and low- or nonfat cheeses; top with whole wheat, rye, or whole grain breads; spread on some mustard rather than mayo or other dressing (unless low- or nonfat is available)

- A salad: include beans, peas, grains, and sweet potatoes (if offered), as well as a variety of fresh veggies (including different types of lettuce, if available) and fruits; choose low-fat dressings and get them on the side
- Soup: choose broth-based rather than cream-based
- Pasta: stick with tomato-based rather than cream-based sauces, and try to get them on the side
- A meat entree: choose baked, broiled, steamed, stewed, or roasted skinless and defatted meats

Dinner

- Vary your entree selection: meat once a week, fish once or twice a week, pasta once or twice a week, chicken once or twice a week, and vegetarian once a week
- Steamed veggies
- Salad or soup (see above for hints)

You can make good healthy food choices. Keep these general tips in mind when looking for finding healthier options:

- Choose baked or grilled foods over fried foods.
- Choose water, milk, or fortified soy milk over sodas.
- Buy groceries if possible: you can better plan your meals, or at least have healthy snacks on hand when you get hungry during late-night chats or study sessions.
- Try to control portion size: ask for a smaller amount, or remember you can come back for seconds if your dining hall is self-serve.
- Have fruit for dessert (and grab an extra piece to snack on later).
- Vary your entrée selections: try to have chicken, fish, other meat, vegetarian, and pasta once or twice a week each.
- Avoid cream-based soups and sauces.
- Moderation is key: pizza, burgers, or ice cream once in a while are fine; just don't make them your key food groups.

All in all, you want to aim for a varied diet with enough whole grains, lean protein, and fruits and vegetables and minimal fatty and sugary foods. For more tips about working in healthier foods, check out the Optimal Nutrition section of the Go Ask Alice! archive. You can also call your school's health service and make an appointment with, or get a referral for, a registered dietitian to create an appropriate food plan for your individual needs.

There are often different culprits outside of the dining hall. During the first year at college, some students consume much more alcohol than in the past. Although there is no fat in alcohol, calories from alcohol are unusual in that they can't be stored or converted to energy for later use. Meaning that calories from alcohol are used first by the body, while calories from food that would otherwise be burned are stored, potentially contributing to weight gain.

Additionally, many first-year students might not think about exercising or may have trouble finding the time. Eating balanced meals and participating in regular physical activity are both major factors in losing or maintaining weight. If your concern is avoiding weight gain, keep physical activity in mind as a key ingredient. It may help to work out with a friend or schedule
your exercise.

Gaining a few pounds may feel like the worst thing that can happen to you. That being said, there's a lot to be said for learning how to take care of yourself, staying healthy, listening to your body, and eating because you're hungry—not because you don't want to study, you just got in a fight with your roommate, or you think you might have flunked a test. Check out the related Q&As to think about what you can do to maintain a healthy eating routine, and have a great first year.

Alice!
Category:
Nutrition & Physical Activity
Optimal Nutrition
Healthy Eating

Related questions

No time to cook? [6]
How can I eat well at college? [7]
Dining out's effects on health [8]
Eating healthy at the campus dining hall? [9]

Resources

Medical Services (Morningside) [10]
Columbia Health Nutrition Services (Morningside) [11]
Medical Services (CUMC) [12]
Student Health Service Nutrition Services (CUMC) [13]

Published date:
Aug 31, 1993
Last reviewed on:
Jul 28, 2015

Footer menu

Contact Alice!
  - Content Use
  - Media Inquiries
  - Comments & Corrections
Syndication & Licensing
  - Licensing Q&As
  - Get Alice! on Your Website
  - Full Site Syndication
  - Link to Go Ask Alice!

Go Ask Alice! is not an emergency or instant response service.

If you are in an urgent situation, please visit our Emergency page to view a list of 24 hour
support services and hotlines.

Source URL: http://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/first-year-fifteen-%E2%80%94-can-it-be-avoided

Links