

The freshman 15, demystified

What's the real scoop on weight gain in college? What are ways to avoid it?

Jetting off to college brings excitement. New friendships and professional opportunities await.

But it also brings the obligation of taking care of your health without a parent's watchful eye. Dorm buffets, sugary drinks and sleeping in all the time can lead to your clothes feeling tighter and your self-esteem feeling lower.

So what's the scoop on the so-called freshman 15? How big of a problem is weight gain in college? How can you prevent it?

First things first: Rachel Bult, a supervisor dietitian at OSF HealthCare, says it's more like three to 10 pounds weight gain in the first year on average, not 15. But the issue is still worth paying attention to.

"You add more calories than you intend to," with food options in college, Bult says. "Also, stress and lack of sleep can cause increased cravings for sweets and comfort foods."

Some tips to consider:

- Exercise portion control. Remember the saying "Are your eyes bigger than your stomach?"
- If you're on a meal plan that means buffet meals every day, go to a healthier station first. Start with a salad and a vinaigrette dressing, Bult suggests. Non-starchy vegetables as your side can provide fiber. Protein like chicken, fish, beans, chickpeas and tofu will help keep you full.
- For exercise, find movement you enjoy. Don't approach it as a chore. If you like pickleball, find a local league.
- Keep healthy snacks, not junk food, at arm's reach.

"When I was in college, I would have a protein smoothie in the morning to help fill me up," Bult recalls. "But you could also keep fruit, string cheese, unsalted nuts or bell peppers with hummus. Just things that are healthier and quicker to grab and go."

- Smartphone apps can be a short-term tool to get you on the right track, Bult says. Apps can track what you're eating, your daily steps and more.

"Those can help you understand the nutritional value of what you're consuming," Bult says.

- Talk to your primary care provider or a dietitian if you need guidance. Research what your local school, health system or social service groups offer.

Learn more

The [OSF HealthCare website](#) has healthy recipes.