

Help for "Freshman 15" Weight Gain

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Along with fresh academic challenges, the transition to university life often leads to the "freshman 15," a term referring to weight gain during a student's first year at college. Late-night snacks and buffet-style dining accompanied by long sedentary hours spent studying often are culprits in the weight gain. But the Tulane Student Health Center offers strategies for students to combat packing on the excess pounds.



The Tulane Student Health Center provides nutrition counseling to help combat the "freshman 15" weight gain that may occur when first-year students encounter tempting food choices and the stress of studying. (Photos by Ryan Rivet)

Dr. James Farrow, professor of pediatrics and medicine and executive director of [student health services](#) at Tulane, says that nutrition services are available to all students.

The services currently include counseling on eating disorders, body image, weight

maintenance and proper vegetarian and vegan meal planning.

“Our student health nutrition program is important as a clinical service for students wanting input on diet, fitness and weight gain or loss, but also provides an important health promotion emphasis when young people are beginning to make lifestyle decisions on their own,” says Farrow.

“Entering college is a major life transition that typically involves being away from home for the first time, preparing and selecting meals on their own, a stressful schedule with less time for exercise and higher alcohol intake.”

Farrow attributes part of the typical change in weight to the type of activities required of students.

“Spending more time in sedentary activities such as library time and Internet time makes for poorer eating habits and predictable weight gain among freshman students,” Farrow says.

If students think they need help regarding weight gain or loss, the first step is to make a doctor's appointment at the student health center. “We have two nutritionists at the student health center and they are seen by referral only,” Farrow adds. “Students must come in to see a primary care physician first, and then they will be referred to a nutritionist.”



On average, in the first year of college, women gain 7 pounds and men gain about 5, says Tulane dietitian Danielle Paciera. Making better food choices and getting regular exercise will help combat the added weight.

To complement the health center's nutrition services, the [Reily Student Recreation Center](#) offers a range of physical activities including group exercise classes and personal training.

“It's not that everyone who is coming to Tulane as a freshman is gaining weight and certainly not everyone who has come to me in their college career has gained weight as a freshman,” says Danielle Paciera, a registered dietitian and certified clinical nutritionist at the student health center.

Paciera says the three biggest factors that she has found in students who have gained weight are an increase in the drinking of caloric beverages such as sodas, coffees and alcohol, a change from structured eating habits at home to more erratic schedules at school and problems adhering to portion control.

The key to avoiding the “freshman 15” may be as simple as knowing that it isn't a myth, Paciera says. While the increase may be gradual in some people, with gains of only 5 to 8 pounds instead of 15, students should be mindful of the changes, she cautions.

According to Paciera, both male and female students can fall victim to weight gain in their first year. Male students may have spent hours a day in football and basketball practices during high school. When that activity level ends as they enter college, they can be as susceptible to weight gain as female students.

“On average, women gain about 7 pounds in the first year of college and men gain about 5 pounds,” she says.