

Food Fight

HOW TO BEAT THE FRESHMAN 15.

By **Tim O'Shei**
Illustrations by **Erik Hageman**

From exams to living on your own to making new friends, your freshman year of college will dish out a heaping portion of stress—not to mention pizza, chicken fingers and combo meals. All-you-can-eat, all-fried, late-night snacking is a normal aspect of dorm life, but it can result in a nemesis many new college students face: the Freshman 15.

WHAT IS THE FRESHMAN 15?

During the day, Kent State University freshman Ashely Race took dance and academic classes; at night, she stayed up late studying. In an atmosphere where 1 am pizza orders were the norm, it was easy to forget about nutrition. Early on, Race gained about five pounds—nothing alarming, but enough to make her feel uncomfortable. “I realized it was a result of [being tempted by] the food around me,” she says.

The “Freshman 15” refers to the 15 pounds that students are said to gain during their first year of college. Though this weight gain isn’t a myth, the number 15 may be an exaggeration. A 2003 Cornell University study showed that the typical freshman packs on an extra 4.2 pounds during the first 12 weeks. Other researchers have pinned the amount at six to seven pounds.

The irregular college schedule (which can conflict with dining hall hours) is one of the main causes of freshman-year weight gain and most students have a hard time adjusting to being told when and where to eat. Many students wake up just before their first class and skip breakfast, says Ingrid Skoog, director of sports nutrition at the University of Oregon. Later in the day, students stave off cravings between classes with vending-machine snacks. “That’s when [intake of] higher sugar and higher fat foods goes up,” says Skoog. By evening, energy is sagging. Since rehearsals often run

into the night, dancers may not get a chance to eat dinner until after the dining hall (which may not have healthy selections, anyway) has closed. The most convenient options are 24-hour takeout, or prepackaged processed fare like potato chips. Late-night eating makes the student wake up feeling too full the next morning to eat breakfast, and the cycle continues.

MAKE A PLAN

The key to resolving your weight woes is to eat more during the day, says Skoog. This is especially crucial for dancers, who burn more energy than the typical student and therefore need more calories.

View nutritious meals and snacks as a necessary part of becoming a star dancer and student.



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• **SEE FOOD AS FUEL.** Just like your iPod needs a battery charge, your body needs energy. View nutritious meals and snacks as a necessary part of becoming a star dancer and student. “Food can increase your ability to perform in class and onstage, and also help you with alertness, focus, and memory,” says Lowry Champion, a graduate teaching fellow in the University of Oregon’s dance program. “This is how you dance to your fullest potential.”

• **CREATE A ROUTINE.** “Three meals a day is a great way to anchor your schedule,” says Robyn Flipse, New Jersey–based nutritionist and author of *Fighting the Freshman Fifteen*, who also recommends spacing meals four or five hours apart. If your schedule makes it impossible to nail breakfast, lunch and dinner, go for foods that can be packed in a gym bag. (See “Bag-Friendly Chow” at right.) You may also find that your body responds better to eating many small meals a day, rather than three large ones, says Catherine Schaeffer, an associate professor in the dance program at Valdosta University in Georgia.

• **IDENTIFY UNHEALTHY HABITS.** Are you having trouble maintaining a healthy weight? Keep a journal of everything you eat. (Note: This doesn’t mean you should get obsessive about what you consume—just write it down to help you determine how to make better choices.) After several days, you’ll probably begin to notice patterns that need changing, such as drinking soda every day.

• **SHOP AT THE DINING HALL.** Turn all-you-can-eat dining halls to your advantage by going shopping. “Use your meal card to shop in the cafeteria,” suggests Flipse. If permitted by your meal plan, pack sandwiches, salads, vegetables, fruits and cereals that are low in sugar and high in fiber. Nonfat plain yogurt (which can be sweetened with honey and fruit) and skim milk can be stored in a small fridge in your dorm room. Also, look for grocers on or near campus where you can stock up on healthy, easy-to-pack foods that can be your fuel during the day.

• **WANT IT? ASK FOR IT.** In her freshman year at Rutgers University in New Jersey,

[continued on p.66]

BAG-FRIENDLY CHOW

EAT-AND-DASH FOODS FINDS

- trail mix (make your own with pretzels, cereal, nuts and dried fruit)
- whole-grain fig bars
- peanut butter crackers
- peanut butter and jelly sandwiches
- nuts
- low-fat cheese sticks
- granola bars
- energy bars
- low-fat popcorn
- raisins
- raisin bran muffins (add protein powder if you bake them yourself)
- fruit
- vegetables
- yogurt

List compiled by students in Lowry Champion’s Performance Nutrition for Dancers class at the University of Oregon and by nutritionist Ingrid Skoog



FRESHMAN 15 FAQ

Is the Freshman 15 real?

Partly. Research shows that the typical freshman quickly gains about five pounds.

Why does it happen?

Timing and temptation. College schedules leave little room for a normal breakfast, lunch and dinner, and readily available food is often unhealthy.

But I could still eat unhealthy food if I live at home, couldn’t I?

Yes, but “usually at home you don’t have 30 choices in front of you, and you can’t go back for seconds, thirds and fourths,” says Rachel Geik, a nutritionist at Purdue University in West Lafayette, IN.

What foods should I avoid?

Limit fatty, fried or sugary foods, and put a weekly cap of one serving of your choice of pizza, fries, chicken fingers, chips, cake, ice cream and the like to prevent overloading.

But fat is an important part of your diet, isn’t it?

Yes—which is why you should eat healthy fats that come from foods like nuts, peanut butter, olive oil and avocados. Those fats actually lower cholesterol.

What’s healthy in a dining hall?

[continued on p.66]

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[FAQ continued from p.64]

The same food that's healthy anywhere—fruits and veggies; poultry that isn't fried; milk and yogurt.

What is unhealthy in a dining hall?

If it looks like it could come from a fast-food restaurant, treat it as if it did and don't eat it often.

I'm paying good money for a meal plan. Shouldn't I get the most out of my money?

Yes, which is why you should stock up on "safe" dining hall food. Toss an apple and a granola bar into your bag each morning for later.

How often should I eat during the day?

Most nutritionists suggest three main meals, with an emphasis on breakfast, because it provides an initial injection of energy. If these meals are small, snack to maintain energy; you can also eat mini meals spaced throughout the day.

Because I'm a dancer, can I eat more than the typical student?

Possibly. Metabolism in most individuals begins to slow around age 18, so eating the same amount as you did at age 14 will probably lead to weight gain. However, college dancers, like athletes, have rigorous enough activity levels to keep metabolism high. Be sure your additional calories are from nutrient-dense food sources.

Can the Freshman 15 work in reverse?

Yes. Stress and packed schedules can also result in weight loss, if you don't make time to eat. In this case, your body isn't getting the nutrients and energy it needs.

How can I tell if I'm losing weight in a bad way?

If you shed a noticeable amount of weight, feel tired all the time or, for women, have irregular periods, you may not be getting enough calories from nutrient-dense sources.

Where can I get help?

Go to your campus medical center and seek out the school nutritionist. You've probably prepaid for some form of basic health-care. Take advantage of it.

What can a nutritionist do for me?

Nutritionists analyze your body type and caloric needs to help you work out a healthy eating plan that fits your schedule. This will cost considerable bucks once you're out of college.

Any tips?

Keep hydrated with water. View soda and alcohol intake in the same way as dessert: It's an extra, just like a slice of pie or a doughnut. Your weekly allowance of these depends on the number of discretionary calories you have left after meeting nutritional needs.

[FOOD FIGHT continued from p.64]

When you have the choice to get the combo, don't. You don't need the pop and fries.

—Ashely Race

dance major Jessica Holt was always famished after her evening dance class. At that hour, the dining hall only offered take-out, and there were no healthy options. So Holt and her friends circulated a petition. "Halfway through the year, they started making salads for us," she says.

•**MUNCH ON HEALTHY FOODS.** Late-night studying and snacking are par for the college course. Instead of sugary drinks, candy and takeout, choose air-popped popcorn: You can eat enough to feel full without taking in too many calories.

•**PARTY SMART.** Even though most are too young to drink alcohol legally, freshmen will have numerous opportunities—and alcoholic drinks are loaded with calories. Flipse says that each can of beer is like eating two slices of bread. A six-pack is almost equal to eating a loaf of bread, or 900 calories. A mixed drink, she says, has about 300 calories—equal to a big scoop of ice cream.

THE THREE Ps

Staying healthy boils down to three things: Planning your time, picking healthy foods and practicing discipline. That's how Race shed her first-semester pounds. Using Weight Watchers as a guide, she filled up on fruits, vegetables and calorie-light, energy-rich fare. She also trained herself to make smart choices in the dining hall. "When you have the choice to get the combo, don't," she says. "You don't need the pop and fries." **DS**

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