

The Freshman Fifteen - A University Student Phenomenon

“First-year university students present a social group with a lifestyle that makes it at risk of body weight gain – thus, the “freshman 15” phrase was coined”

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COLUMN ARTICLE

Normal body weight is one of the desired parameter for enjoying good health. It can be attained and maintained by following a healthy lifestyle that follows sound nutrition and being engaged in a physical activity program. Excess body weight is mainly because of storage of fat and this heavier weight is a risk factor for some diseases such as diabetes, hypertension and other cardiovascular diseases – among many others. The status of body weight of an individual is a reflection of the overall effects of influencing factors, such as genetics, environment and nutritional status – among others that can be cultural. The World Health Organization of the United Nations considers that body weight gain is one of the leading global health problems and recommended that promotion of weight loss as one strategy to fight this overweight and obesity epidemic. However, studies have shown that most people who lose weight through lifestyle modifications regain the weight within several years. Thus, there seems to be a need for more proactive and effective strategies to combat this danger.

University students constitute a segment of the population in any society. They are young and able to acquire knowledge. Promoting a healthy pattern for their nutrition and physical activity would be beneficial to them, their peers and members of their immediate family circle and those whom they may relate to and interact with. First-year students at a university are those who have just come out

of high school with different scholarly interests that make them join either a theoretical or scientific-type colleges accordingly. Students in their first year at the university may still carry over their active life from their high school years; then as they progress in their studies and with mounting academic pressure, their lifestyle is expected to be modified. It was documented that freshmen scored higher in health-promoting lifestyle profile than when they were in subsequent study years. Studies have considered university students as a population at risk of eating disorders and can be vulnerable to disturbance in their body weight and its perception.



Source: Google images

https://www.google.com.kw/search?q=freshmen+body+shapes&rlz=1C1E0DB_enKW571K-W577&espv=2&biw=1366&bih=627&source=l-nms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiU89Om3pX-NAhULsxQKHfchA48Q_AUIBigB#imgrc=d8wat-BidGS1tyM%3A

What became known as the “freshman 15” was coined in the United States in the past few years to indicate that students attending their first year of university or college gain about 15 pounds (6.8 kg). This was found to be significantly more weight than age-matched individuals who did not attend university or college. American freshmen gained between 1.5-3.0 kg of their body weight during the first semester in the university. A meta-analysis of body weight change in first-year students in the United States showed that nearly 66% gained an average of 3.5 kg and 10% of them gained nearly 7 kg. Students gained approximately 6 kg after four years of college and overweight and obesity increased from 18 to 31% by the end of the study. An explanation of this phenomenon was that most students in the United States move to university campuses - where they typically have “all-you-can-eat” meal plans and lack of parental supervision. Also, during the freshman time period at a university or college, many social forces act on students to change their feeding, drinking, and sporting behavior. Studies reported that many students who were active in sports in high school either stopped being active or were less active when they joined the university. The body weight gain phenomenon among university freshmen was also studied in several European countries. In Belgium, 68% of students in their first semester at the university gained an average of 1.0 kg in weight and 66 showed an increase in body mass index. In The Netherlands, students gained an average of 1.1 kg in weight in first 3 months in the university and the weight gain (2-6 kg) continued throughout the 4 years of their education. Students with weight gain experienced hindrance in exercise and mental well-being. In Spain, female and male students were found to lead a sedentary lifestyle in their first year at the university and as the academic year progressed, dietary habits deviated much from the healthy Mediterranean-type diet. Thus, it was concluded that university students represent a social group that is at risk of having inappropriate nutritional habits and lifestyle are of high risk for weight gain.

Studies in the United States, Europe and the Far East revealed that misperception of self-reported body weight and shape among university students seemed to be universal across the globe. This misperception represents a difficulty in view of accurate data collection and in mapping ap-

propriate strategies for curbing the obesity problem. Collectively, these studies have shown that misperceptions of body weight, height, body mass index, and body shape of university students are subjected to a variety of influencing factors. Such factors include: gender, age, place of residence, maternal education level, eating behavior, and socio-economic factors. Aspects of body weight, height, body mass index, and body shape are all related to nutrition and lifestyle. Since university students are viewed as a group that is at risk of weight gain enhancing their self-awareness of these aspects and about their related health risks would be of most significant. Such can be achieved by interventional programs that raise the level of nutrition knowledge of adolescents and also their parents. Also, it is critical to transform weight loss intentions to actual behaviors to combat the obesity problem. Means of intervention can be utilized, such as short courses, workshops, publications, and public announcements in the mass media. Additionally, since the internet is widely-available and that university students are among the avid users of computers, online awareness programs can prove to be as valuable tools. Such type of intervention can be viewed as an inexpensive means in preventing weight gain among university students in their first semester.

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