

# health care for college students



College is filled with many opportunities to learn and experience life. You'll be responsible for making your own choices, including choices about your health. Following is important information to help you stay healthy and safe on your new journey.

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## A message from your pediatrician

Even though you're in college your *pediatrician still cares about your health*. You can call your pediatrician any time you have questions. If you live nearby, you can continue to make appointments or come in when you are home on break. You may even want to see your pediatrician for a physical before you start school (your school may even require it).

## Health care on campus

If you are going to live on campus, check to see if your school has a student health service. It's a place you can go for medical care, advice, information, and counseling. Student health services are usually well staffed with a variety of health care professionals. They also know pediatricians and other doctors in the area in case you need additional care.

## What to bring to school

In addition to the clothes, computer, and other day-to-day items you will need, don't forget to pack

- A filled-out health record.
- A list of any medicines you take, including their dosages.
- A list of your allergies.
- A list of any past medical problems (eg, if you had surgery or were in the hospital).
- A list of any special needs you might have (such as chronic conditions or disabilities).
- A record of any mental health problems.
- Your immunization record that shows which vaccines you have had, including the type of vaccine, when you got it, and if you had any side effects.
- Proof of health insurance. Are you still going to be on your parents' policy? If so, take a copy of the insurance card with you. Find out what type of plan you have (eg, HMO, PPO), what's covered, how to file claims, and what to do in case of an emergency. Keep in mind that your parents will be notified each time the insurance company is billed for something. Note:

As of January 1, 2014, almost all Americans will be required to have health insurance or otherwise pay a penalty. Visit [www.healthchildren.org/ACAmarketplace](http://www.healthchildren.org/ACAmarketplace) for more information.

- First aid kit for small emergencies. Make sure it includes
  - Bandages for small cuts and scrapes
  - Gauze and adhesive tape
  - An elastic bandage for wrapping sprains
  - Waterless hand cleaner
  - Antibacterial/antibiotic ointment
  - A digital (not mercury) thermometer
  - An ice pack or chemical cold pack
  - Acetaminophen or ibuprofen for aches, pains, and fever
  - Other medicines (Ask your pediatrician for suggestions.)

## Common health problems

With students living together in dorms and apartments, eating together in cafeterias, and sitting together in classrooms, illnesses and infections can spread easily. Here is a brief guide to common illnesses and what you should do if you get one.

**Colds and flu.** These are caused by viruses. While sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between them, colds usually cause milder symptoms than the flu.

### Common cold symptoms include

- Coughing
- Sneezing
- Watery eyes
- Mild fevers

### Flu symptoms include

- Higher fever (commonly above 102°F or 39°C)
- Body aches
- Dry cough
- Upset stomach or vomiting

## Don't ignore these symptoms

Call the student health service right away if you have

- A fever of 102°F (39°C) or higher
- A headache and a stiff neck
- Pain with urination
- An unusual discharge from your penis or vagina
- A change in your menstrual cycle
- Pain in the abdomen that will not go away
- A persistent cough, chest pain, or trouble breathing
- Pain or any other symptoms that worry you or last longer than you think they should

## What you can do

The most you can do is rest, drink a lot of fluids, and treat the symptoms. You can try using over-the-counter cold and flu medicines or fever and pain medicines. They may help you feel better. However, do not take aspirin when you have the flu. Your pediatrician or the student health service can suggest which medicines may help your symptoms, as well as answer your questions.

Some types of the flu can be treated with antiviral agents, but you have to take them during the first or second day of the illness, and a prescription is required. They can help you feel better faster.

## Prevention

These tips can help lower your risk of getting a cold or the flu.

- Wash your hands often!
- Get a flu vaccine each fall.

**Strep throat, sinus infections, ear infections.** These are caused by bacteria. Symptoms may include

- A very sore throat
- Pain in your ears or sinuses
- A persistent fever

## What you can do

If you have these symptoms, go to the student health service. The staff will be able to tell you what the problem is and give you antibiotics if you need them. If you need to take antibiotics, take them exactly as you are told and be sure to take all of them. If you don't, the infection can come back.

## Prevention

- Avoid close contact with anyone who has an infection. That means no kissing or sharing drinks or utensils with someone who is ill.
- See your doctor for regular checkups.

**Meningococcal disease.** A common form of this is meningitis.

This disease can infect the brain, the spinal cord, blood, or a combination of these.

## Symptoms include

- High fever
- Stiff neck
- Severe headache
- A flat, pink, red, or purple rash
- Nausea and vomiting
- Sensitivity to light

## What you can do

It is important to seek medical treatment right away. The disease can be fatal or may result in permanent brain damage or lifelong problems with the nervous system.

## Prevention

The meningococcal vaccine is recommended for teens 11 through 18 years of age and for college freshmen living in dorms. The vaccine is effective against most, but not all, strains of the bacteria that cause this infection.

**Bruises, sprains, and strains.** These are very common and are usually not very serious. Here's how to tell the difference between them.

- Bruises cause the skin to turn purple, brown, or red in color.
- Strains are injuries to muscles and tendons that result from too much or sudden stretching.

- Sprains are injuries to the ligaments, the connecting tissue between bones.

## What you can do

Use the RICE method of treatment.

- Rest—especially for the first 24 hours.
- Ice—put ice packs or cold gel packs on the injury for 20 minutes every 4 hours.
- Compression—wrap the injured body part in an elastic bandage.
- Elevation—for example, if you have sprained your ankle, prop your foot up on pillows to keep it at a level higher than your heart.

Visit the student health service if your pain or swelling does not get better in 1 to 2 days or if you are unable to put any weight on the injured area.

## Prevention

Being physically active is a great way to stay healthy, but be smart and avoid injuries by

- Using the right safety gear (such as pads and helmets).
- Warming up and cooling down. Stretch out before and after you exercise or play a sport.
- Taking breaks. Don't exercise or play through pain.

**Mononucleosis ("mono").** College students often worry about a disease called "mono"—also known as "the kissing disease." Mono is caused by a virus.

Symptoms include

- Fever
- Sore throat
- Headache
- Swollen lymph nodes (glands) in the neck
- Extreme tiredness

## What you can do

If you have a sore throat or bad flu that doesn't go away in a week to 10 days, see your doctor. Mono is diagnosed by a blood test called the *monospot test*. There is no specific treatment for mono; just get plenty of rest and eat a healthy diet.

## Health 101

Keeping yourself healthy is the best way to avoid getting sick. Three important things you can do are rest, eat well, and exercise.

## Rest

Sleep is important because

- Your body cannot fight off germs as well when you are tired and run-down.
- You are more likely to feel stressed or become depressed.
- You may have a hard time staying awake in class.
- You may have trouble concentrating on papers and tests.

Try to get about 8 to 9 hours of sleep a night whenever you can.

## Eat well

Vending machine food or fast food may be quick and cheap when you are busy and on a budget but eating well is important. Try to remember to

- Eat fruits and vegetables every day (your goal should be 5 fruits, vegetables, or both a day).

- Eat lean meats, fish, and poultry.
- Eat foods high in calcium, such as low-fat dairy products.
- Limit junk food or foods with a lot of fat, sugar, and salt.
- Limit sugary drinks such as pop, juice, sweetened teas or coffees, and sport drinks.
- Research healthy vegetarian options if you are a vegetarian.

## Exercise

An important part of staying healthy is getting enough exercise. There are 3 basic types of exercise, and ideally everyone should do all 3.

- Aerobic exercise strengthens your heart and lungs. These are activities such as biking, running, fast walking, swimming, active dancing, and rowing.
- Strengthening exercise tones and builds muscles and bone mass. You can do this by doing sit-ups, push-ups, and leg lifts or by working out with weights or resistance bands.
- Stretching exercise, such as yoga, improves your flexibility or range of motion.

Don't have time to work out? There are many ways to sneak exercise into your day. For example, take the stairs instead of the elevator. If you are not used to exercising or if you have a chronic health problem, talk with your pediatrician or the student health service before starting an exercise program.

## Taking care of your mental health

Starting college can be stressful. You may be away from home for the first time. Maybe you miss your family and friends. And it may take you time to adjust to new surroundings, new teachers, and new friends. All these things can make you feel alone, overworked, and stressed out. Following is information concerning your mental health.

## Making friends

Friends usually become your main support system while in college. In fact, college friends often become close friends for life.

You may be worried about how you will make new friends. You will probably meet some people you like in the first few days of school, and you will meet more in your classes, in clubs or sports, and through other friends. If it takes a while to find people you click with, don't worry; it will happen.

Roommates can be terrific friends or great sources of stress. Even roommates who like each other will clash over things like cleaning, bedtimes, and music. Talk these things over early on and you will be less likely to have problems later. If you and your roommate just can't get along, talk with your resident advisor (RA) about how to handle your roommate problem.

## Missing home

Many students miss home—even those who've been away from home before. Feeling homesick doesn't make you less mature or mean that you are not ready to be on your own; it just means you are human! Here are a few tips that may help.

- Talk with your friends about it. Chances are they're feeling the same way.
- Keep in touch with family and friends back home, but make sure you develop new relationships at school.
- Still having trouble? Try talking with a counselor.

Also, remember that going home for visits may be hard. You've changed. Your family has changed. Even your home friends may have changed. Old conflicts don't disappear and new ones may come up. Again, if things are too stressful for you to handle alone, talk with a counselor.

## Dealing with depression

There will be days when you feel down, when the pressures of college life really get to you. Those feelings are normal. When you feel down, take some time out for yourself and do something that makes you feel good. Spend time with friends. Exercise. Read a good book.

Sometimes, though, feeling down can turn into depression. Depression is a serious illness that can be treated. If you have had any of the following symptoms for 2 weeks or more, see a counselor right away:

- Sad mood
- Hopeless, helpless, worthless, or guilty feelings
- Loss of pleasure in things you usually enjoy
- Sleep problems
- Eating problems
- Low energy, extreme tiredness, lack of concentration
- Physical symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, or body aches that do not respond to treatment

If at any time you have thoughts of death or suicide, seek help immediately. Do not think you can handle depression on your own. If one of your friends seems depressed, suggest that he or she see a counselor as soon as possible.

## Drinking responsibly

Drinking is a huge problem on most college campuses. Most college students drink and a large number drink too much. Binge drinking (having 5 or more drinks in a short time) is common among both guys and girls.

Heavy or binge drinking can lead to physical illness, long-term drinking problems, and even death. Drinking is known to increase sexual aggressiveness, which can lead to sexual harassment and date rape. Drinking also clouds your judgment. You can't think straight when you're drunk. You're also more likely to make unhealthy choices such as having unsafe sex, which may lead to sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unwanted pregnancies.

The legal drinking age in the United States is 21. The best way to prevent drinking-related problems is to not drink. If you are 21 and choose to drink, be smart. That means

- Stop after 1 or 2 drinks.
- Don't drink and drive.
- Don't let friends drink and drive.
- Don't ride with someone who has been drinking.
- Don't drink with people you do not know.

If you feel you need to cut down on your drinking, if friends are concerned about your drinking, or if you ever feel guilty about something you have done while drinking, see a counselor at school.

## Making healthy decisions about sex

College is often a time when young people begin to explore their sexuality. But this doesn't mean everyone in college is sexually active. In fact, many are not. If you want to wait to have sex, you are not alone. Lots of people your age have realized it's a great idea to wait until they are older.

No matter what your decision is about sex, be smart about it. Don't do things that will put your health at risk. Remember, having sex can expose you to STIs such as chlamydia, gonorrhea, herpes, or HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Use a reliable form of birth control, and remember that only barrier protection with condoms will prevent transmission of infection. One type of disease called *human papillomavirus* (HPV) can cause cancers of the mouth and throat, cervix, and genitals in teens and adults. There are 2 types of HPV vaccine: one for females and one for females and males. The more sexual partners you have, the greater your risk. Not having sex is the only sure way to prevent these infections.

College may also be a time for sorting out your sexual identity. If you are questioning your sexual identity, talking with a counselor may help. Many colleges have support and social groups for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students or for students still trying to sort things out. These groups can help students feel less isolated.

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From your doctor

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