

Staying Well at College

You have survived the trials and tribulations of a good part of adolescence and watched your child graduate from high school. It is time to launch your teen off to college. Parents are used to providing for their children, including taking care of their basic health care needs. Now is the time for teens to put into practice what they have learned from parents about taking care of themselves.

The first few weeks of college are definitely a time of adjustment, not only emotionally, but physically as well. This can be a scary time for both parents and young adults. It takes a bit of practice to feel confident about health care decisions when on your own, especially if you're not feeling well.

Most colleges offer basic health services to students. These usually include: treatment of minor injury and illness, screening exams, immunizations, flu shots, strep throat testing, pregnancy testing, urinalysis, allergy injections, as well as assistance with referral to specialists, nutrition and weight management, treatment of sexually transmitted diseases, contraception, wellness assessment and health promotion, and dealing with chronic diseases such as asthma and diabetes. In addition, health services usually offer educational programs and free information and resources on a variety of health issues related to college students. Some college health services may include counseling services, or this may be a separate department on campus.

What tips can you give your teens that will assist them when you aren't there? Encourage the following habits at the beginning of college and it will make for a safe, healthy, academically productive, and positive experience. Some of the tips may seem like common sense to us as parents. However, numerous visits to health services on college campuses are for routine health problems that were handled at home by mom or dad before the move to college. Many times, what new college students need is education and support in taking care of themselves.

Tips for Staying Well at College

- Make sure that immunizations are up to date. Consider getting the Meningococcal vaccine to prevent meningitis. Have a physical exam or health check-up before going to college. Although some colleges require these, others only recommend them. It will work to your advantage to begin the school year in a healthy condition.
- Be familiar with your health insurance and carry your insurance card in your wallet. Most colleges offer a health insurance plan as an option if you

- are not already covered. You will find it helpful to know what your insurance does and does not cover, and when referral is required.
- Don't skip meals and try to eat balanced meals. If you are short on time, have a piece of fruit, cheese and crackers, granola bar, or peanut butter on a slice of bread. Most colleges have taken the food court approach to meals for students so there are quite a number of choices for meals. Many of the choices may be of the fast food variety. It is important to remember that fast foods are usually high in salt, fat, and calories. Look for raw vegetables, fruit and salad options, and check out the broiled rather than fried entrees. Choose baked potatoes rather than french-fries, and try the light sour cream or yogurt rather than butter on the potato. Order pizza with veggies and skip the extra cheese and meat toppings. Consider skim milk rather than a soft drink with your meal.
 - Take a 20-30 minute relaxation and exercise break each day. Go outside for a walk. Explore a new area of campus with a friend. Become familiar with resources on campus that offer exercise and fitness opportunities.
 - Attempt to get at least 6 hours of sleep each night. Learn the amount of sleep that your body needs to function at its best, and try to stick to it.
 - Plan your study time in two-hour time blocks. Plot specific times to study each subject on a calendar and do it. Allow 10-20 minute breaks between study blocks.
 - Learn how to properly manage common illnesses such as colds, sore throats, and gastrointestinal problems. Most viruses will run their course in 7-14 days. It usually takes a bit longer for flu symptoms to subside. Antibiotics are not useful for viral infections. It is helpful to have a few over-the-counter medications on hand such as Acetaminophen, Ibuprofen, (for pain, fever and musculoskeletal aches) and Pseudoephedrine (a decongestant). These may be taken according to the package directions. It is important that aspirin not be taken for a viral illness such as Reye's Syndrome can occur in college students. Drinking cool non-alcoholic fluids is helpful for colds and sore throats. Vitamin C and Zinc spray or lozenges have been found to decrease the duration of a sore throat and the virus that causes colds.
 - If you experience nausea, vomiting or diarrhea, stay on a liquid diet (soups, carbonated beverages, juices, etc) and progress to a bland diet (no fatty or fried foods, soft foods, avoid spicy foods and roughage) as tolerated over the next two days. You should then be able to resume your regular diet without complications. Over-the counter medications such as Emetrol (for nausea), or Kaopectate or Imodium (for diarrhea) may help alleviate some discomfort. Again, take as directed on the package. If your temperature is elevated above 100 degrees F you should rest in bed until it returns to normal. Remember that extra rest is important in helping your body heal.

- If you are doing these things and you continue to have an elevated temperature, or do not feel that you are improving after 3-4 days, you should contact your health service. If you have a severe headache with stiff neck and/or vomiting, you should contact your campus health service or go to the nearest emergency room immediately. Anytime you have symptoms accompanied by severe pain or that interfere with sleep or mobility, or if you have a fever over 102 degrees F, you should seek assistance from your health service or emergency facility. Keep the health services phone number handy so that you have easy access to assistance if you become ill.
- Make informed, sensible decisions regarding sexual activity. If you choose to be sexually active, be smart and stay healthy by respecting yourself and your partner. If you have questions about protecting yourself, taking precautions, or if you suspect you have a sexually transmitted disease, remember that non-judgmental, confidential treatment and referral as well as free information are available at your health service.
- Learn specific stress reduction techniques and use them. Check out free resources for stress management at your campus counseling center or health service. If you feel overwhelmed or burdened, stuck in a hopeless situation, helpless to make things better, suicidal, or feel that you are a danger to yourself or others, you should seek counseling immediately.
- Do not get into the habit of using caffeine, alcohol, medications/drugs, excess sugar, or smoking as a means of relieving stress or studying for exams. These only contribute to health problems.

Become familiar with support services on campus and what they offer. Don't hesitate to seek assistance and support when needed. Maintain a positive attitude and enjoy your college experience. Your days at college may be remembered as some of the best days of your life!

This information was adapted from materials that originally appeared on the Tips on Teens Web site authored by Susan Panzarine, PhD and Elaine Rubenstein, PhD, LCSW-C. This content was written by Nancy Magnuson, DSN, a Certified Family Nurse Practitioner who has extensive experience caring for college students. Dr. Panzarine is the author of *A Parent's Guide to the Teen Years: Raising Your 11- to 14-year-old in the Age of Chat Rooms and Navel Rings*, published in 2000 by Checkmark Books. Dr. Rubenstein maintains an active private practice, working with teenagers and their families.

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