

Health Care for College Students: What Your Pediatrician Wants You to Know



Starting college is an exciting time in your life. New worlds are opening up to you, and there are many choices to make: what classes to take, what to major in, what kind of work you want to do when you graduate. All of these choices are now *yours*. This is both a great freedom and a huge responsibility.

In much the same way, you are now largely in charge of your health and well-being. You probably have a lot of questions about keeping healthy while in college. This brochure will answer some of your questions about how to take care of yourself.

Your pediatrician and the student health service

Your pediatrician will not abandon you just because you are starting college. He or she may give you a physical before you start school (some colleges require you to have a physical before you can attend classes). Your pediatrician will also make sure that all your immunizations are up-to-date and all your medical records are complete. You will still be able to call your pediatrician if you have any questions. If you continue to live near your pediatrician, you may still want to see him or her for your care. But if you are going to live on campus, and the school provides a student health service, it may be the first place you go for health care. If one is not available, most schools will provide you with a list of health services in the community.

What is a student health service?

The student health service is an important part of the college or university you are about to attend. It is there for you when you need medical care, advice, information, or counseling. Student health services are not Band-Aid stations. Their medical, nursing, and counseling staffs are familiar with the problems and needs of college students. They also know pediatricians and other physicians in the community in case you need additional care.

Yet, if you are used to going to your pediatrician for your health care, the student health service may seem a bit strange at first. You may see a team of health care providers, which may include doctors, nurse practitioners, therapists, and health educators. This system will work best if you keep open the lines of communication between yourself, your parents, the student health service, and your pediatrician.

Things to do before you go

Get your medical and immunization records. Make sure the student health service has the following information about your medical history:

1. A complete list of every medication you take, including its dosage and strength
2. A list of your allergies, significant past medical problems (including surgeries and hospitalizations), and special needs (such as chronic conditions and disabilities)
3. A record of any mental health problems
4. Relevant family medical history
5. A record of which immunizations you have received, including type of vaccine, date given, and any reaction

Make sure you have health insurance. If you will still be on your parents' policy, take a copy of the insurance card with you. Find out what type of plan you have (HMO, PPO, etc), what the policy covers, how to file claims, and what to do in case of an emergency. Talk this over with your parents. Remember that if you are on your parents' insurance policy, they will be notified each time the insurance company is billed for something.

Take extras of any prescription medications you need. Also, find out the name of a pharmacy near your school and how to obtain prescription refills when you need them.

Get a book. Everyone should own a book on personal health care.

Things to take with you

A good first aid kit is a useful thing to have in case you do not feel well or you have a small emergency. Your first aid kit should contain the following:

- Bandages for small cuts and scrapes
- Gauze and adhesive tape
- An elastic bandage for wrapping sprains
- Liquid soap
- Antibacterial/antibiotic ointment
- A digital (not mercury) thermometer
- An ice pack or chemical cold pack
- Medicine for an upset stomach
- Acetaminophen or ibuprofen for aches, pains, and fever
- Medicine for diarrhea
- Medicine for allergies
- Sore throat lozenges or spray

The basics of staying healthy

There are many things you can do on your own to keep yourself healthy.

Rest

College students often skimp on rest because there is so much to do. However, trying to get by on too little sleep can cause some serious problems.

What happens when you do not get enough sleep?

- You may be more likely to catch colds and other minor illnesses. 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.

Young adults often need a bit more sleep than older adults—sleeping about 8 to 9 hours a night is necessary for most 18-year-olds.

Nutrition

Eating well is just as important as getting enough rest. This means eating enough fruits and vegetables every day; eating lean meats, fish, and poultry; and limiting fried and processed foods. Watching your intake of junk food, fatty

foods, sugar, and salt is important. Also, it is important to consume enough food that is high in calcium, such as low-fat dairy products, to help maintain bone mass and strength.

It is possible to eat a healthy vegetarian diet at college. However, this may require some additional planning to make sure you get all the nutrients you need.

Exercise

Another 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 (good examples are biking, running, fast walking, swimming, aerobic dancing, and rowing). Three times a week you should get some type of aerobic exercise for at least 20 minutes.
- **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, like yoga, improves your flexibility or range of motion.

There are a number of ways to sneak more exercise into your day. Instead of driving or taking a bus to run errands, walk or ride a bike (wear a helmet when biking). Walking to class can be good exercise, too. Even in-line skating around campus can be a good workout (but make sure you wear a helmet, wrist guards, and knee pads). If you are not used to exercising or if you have a chronic health problem, you may want to talk with your pediatrician or a doctor at the student health service before starting an exercise program.

Sexual health

College is often a time when young people begin to explore their sexuality. This does not mean that all college students are sexually active. In fact, many are not. If you have decided to wait to have sex, you are not alone. Remember, the decision as to when to have sex is yours and yours alone. Do not let yourself be pressured into having sex if you do not want to.

If you are sexually active or are thinking about it, you owe it to yourself to make responsible decisions about sex. Make sure you can talk to your partner about the quality of your relationship and about sexual issues. Discuss whether you will date other people. Find out your partner's sexual history, including exposure to sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). If you are in a heterosexual relationship, talk about birth control and what you would do if it failed. If you cannot talk about these issues with your partner, you should think about whether you should have a sexual relationship with him or her.

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, and bisexual students. These groups can help students feel less isolated.

Sexual relationships expose you to the risk of STDs and viruses that can cause cancer and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). The more sexual partners you have, the greater your risk. There are more than 25 diseases that are spread through sexual contact. Some of them are easy to treat, but when left untreated they can cause serious health problems. Others, like herpes, have no cure. AIDS, also sexually transmitted, can kill you. Not having sex is the only sure way to prevent STDs. If you do have sex, the safest way is to have sex with only one person who has no STDs and no other sex partners. Use a latex condom *every time* you have sex.

Common health problems

There are times when you should contact the student health service immediately. Call the health service if you have any of the following:

- A fever of 102.5°F or higher
- A headache accompanied by 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

Respiratory infections

Illnesses like colds, the flu, and sore throats are hard to escape while in college. With students living together in dormitories and apartments, eating together in large cafeterias, and sitting together in classrooms, these respiratory infections spread easily. Washing your hands often will help you avoid these illnesses. Dust allergy and exposure to cigarette smoke will make you more likely to get cold symptoms.

How you treat a respiratory infection will depend on whether it is caused by bacteria or a virus. **Colds and flu** are caused by viruses. There is really nothing you can do to get rid of them quickly—the most you can do is rest, drink a lot of fluids, and treat the symptoms. How can you tell a cold from the flu? Colds usually cause milder symptoms than the flu. Coughing, sneezing, watery eyes, and mild fevers are common cold symptoms. The flu, on the other hand, is more serious. You will probably have a fairly high fever, body aches, and a dry cough with the flu. You may also have an upset stomach or vomit. If you are vomiting, drink liquids such as sports drinks, water, or tea.

Over-the-counter cold and flu medications may help relieve your symptoms. Read labels when buying medications for colds and flu to make sure you are getting the right medicine for your symptoms.

Some types of the flu can be treated with antiviral agents if given in the first day or two of the illness. This can speed recovery. Under some circumstances, antiviral agents can be taken before exposure to the flu and can prevent illness. Consider getting the influenza vaccine when it becomes available each fall. Safe and effective vaccines are available to protect against the flu.

Strep throat and some sinus and ear infections are caused by bacteria. These are treated with antibiotics. If you have a very sore throat, pain in your ears or sinuses, or a persistent fever, 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 your doctor does give you antibiotics, *take them exactly as you are told, and be sure to take all of them*. If you do not, bacteria can become resistant to the antibiotics and result in a more serious infection.

Meningococcal disease

College students, particularly freshmen living in dormitories, are at an increased risk of contracting meningococcal disease. A common form of this is meningitis. This disease can infect the brain, spinal cord, and/or blood. Symptoms include a high fever; stiff neck; severe headache; a flat, red rash; nausea; vomiting; and sensitivity to light. It is important to seek medical treatment immediately. The disease can be fatal or may result in permanent brain damage or lifelong problems with the nervous system.

The truth about mononucleosis (“mono”)

College students often worry about a disease called “**mono**”—also known as “the kissing disease.” Mono, a viral infection, is not as common or usually as serious as most people think. Symptoms include fever, sore throat, headache, swollen glands, and extreme tiredness. If you seem to have a sore throat or bad flu that does not go away in a week to 10 days, the problem might be mono. See your doctor. Mono is diagnosed by a blood test called the “mono spot.” Even if the test confirms that you have mono, there is no specific treatment, except to get plenty of rest and eat a healthy diet. However, you may need to restrict your activity to prevent possible serious injury. The good news is that most people are better within a month. If you have had a documented case of mono, you cannot get it again.

A safe vaccine is now available to prevent the forms of meningococcal disease that are most common among college students. If you plan to live in a dormitory, ask your pediatrician about immunization against meningococcal disease before you leave for college.

Bruises, sprains, and strains

Bruises, sprains, and strains are very common and usually are not very serious.

- **Bruises** are injuries to the skin that cause the surface of the skin to turn purple, brown, or red in color.
 - **Strains** are injuries to the muscles and tendons that result from too much or sudden stretching.
 - **Sprains** are injuries to the ligaments, the connecting tissue between bones.
- Bruises, strains, and sprains should be treated with
- **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 a day or two.

Taking care of your mental health

Starting college brings with it many new stresses. You may be away from home for the first time in your life and may miss your family and friends. You will have more schoolwork to do, and it may take more time and effort than in high school. It may take you a while to find people with whom you have things in common. All these things can make you feel alone, overworked, and stressed out.

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, do not worry—it will happen.

Roommates can be terrific friends or great sources of stress. Even roommates who like each other will have conflicts 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 cannot get along, talk to a resident counselor. He or she can offer advice on how to handle your roommate problem.

Homesickness

Homesickness is very common among students away from home—even those who had previously been away at overnight camp or traveled far away. There is a difference between being away from home for 8 weeks and being gone for 8 months. There is also a difference between leaving home for a while (knowing you will be going back) and the start of leaving for good (knowing your returns may never be the same again). Feeling homesick does not make you less mature or mean you are not ready to be on your own. If you feel homesick, talk to your friends at school about it. Chances are they are feeling the same way. Keep in touch with family and friends back home, but make sure you develop new relationships at school. If your homesickness just will not go away and does not seem to be getting better after a few months at school, speaking with a counselor might help. Also, remember that going home for the first visit may be difficult because of changes in yourself or your family. Old conflicts do not just disappear once you go to college, and new ones may surface. Again, if things are too stressful for you to handle alone, talk to a counselor.

Depression

There will be days when you feel down, when the pressures of college life really get to you. Those feelings are normal and will pass in time. 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
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Physical symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, or body aches that do not respond to treatment

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 and violence

Drinking is a huge problem on most college campuses. The majority of college students drink, and a large number drink to excess. More than half of all male college students are binge drinkers (those who have 5 or more drinks at one sitting), and more than one third of female students are binge drinkers. Heavy or binge drinking can lead to physical illness (or death), long-term drinking problems, and aggression and violence. Drinking is known to increase sexual aggressiveness, which can lead to sexual harassment and date rape. Drinking also clouds your judgment and may make you more likely to engage in unsafe sexual practices, which in turn may lead to STDs and unintended pregnancies.

The legal drinking age in the United States is 21. The best way to prevent drinking-related problems is to avoid drinking altogether. If you are of legal age and choose to drink, be responsible. Stop after 1 or 2 drinks. *Do not* drink and drive, *do not* let friends drink and drive, and *do not* ride with someone who has been drinking. Follow the designated driver rule. Do not drink with people you do not know. If you feel you need to cut down on your drinking, if friends comment on the amount of drinking you do, or if you ever feel guilty about something you have done while drinking, see a counselor at school.

Just some friendly advice...

- Poor study habits are the primary reason students do poorly in college. College means increased freedom, with less time spent in the classroom and more time spent studying independently. Learn to budget your time and use it wisely.
 - Violence, crime, racism, sexism, and cults are alive and well on every college campus. A college campus is no safer than your hometown. Lock your doors and take care of yourself.
 - Sorority and fraternity life can offer many advantages, but it can also isolate students from the rest of the college experience. Make sure you thoroughly investigate any sorority or fraternity that you are considering.
- College life will present many opportunities and challenges. Take care of yourself, and enjoy your college years.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.



Health record card

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Date of Birth: _____

Pediatrician's Name: _____

Office Address: _____

Telephone/Fax: _____

Allergies: _____

Chronic Medical Conditions: _____

Blood Type: _____

